DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 549 CS 209 523

AUTHOR	Wyman, Linda, Ed.
TITLE	Poetry in the Classroom.
INSTITUTION	Missouri Association of Teachers of English.
PUB DATE	Jul 84
NOTE	101p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 (Stock No. 36060, $4.00 member, $4.50 nonmember).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Missouri English Bulletin; v42 n6 Jul 1984
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Creative Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Poets; *Reading Material Selection; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The articles in this journal issue focus on the use of poetry for study in classrooms at all levels. Titles and authors of the articles include (1) "Summoning the Poem: Several Roads to Xanadu" by Ben F. Nelms; (2) "ABC's of Reading and Writing Poetry in Junior High" by Barbara Arnold; (3) "Invitations" by Elizabeth D. Nelms; (4) "Teaching Poetry to College Freshmen: A Systematic Approach" by Barbara J. Hunt; (5) "A Stair at a Time" by Donna M. Grout; (6) "Coaxing a Wild Surmise" by Linda Wyman; (7) "Some Thoughts on Teaching Poetry" by Robert C. Jones; (8) "Boredom, 'Beowulf,' and Other Important Battles in Teaching Poetry" by Amy Lale Luebbert; (9) "A Lesson on 'How a Poem Means'" by Barbara Hager Mercer; (10) "Poetry Writing in Elementary School: Gaining by Giving Up" by Joyce Pyle; (11) "Teaching Poetry Writing" by Maryfrances Wagner; (12) "The Teacher as Poet: 'A Place for the Genuine'" by Virginia Frazier; (13) "Poetscout: On Collecting and Selecting Poetry" by Paul B. Janeczko; and (14) "How to Grow an Anthology" by Ben F. Nelms and others. (HOD)

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Missouri English Bulletin

Poetry in the Classroom

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"Coaxing a Wild Surmise" originally appeared under the title "Poetry for Those Who Need It and Can't Read It" in Notes on Teaching English, Vol. V, No. 2 (May 1978), and is reprinted with the kind permission of the Georgia-South Carolina English Association and the Georgia Southern College Department of English.

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Missouri English Bulletin

MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Vol. 42 No. 6 Second Journal Issue July 1984

Editor: Linda Wyman

Editorial Board: Linda Horton and Ben F. Nelms

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Foreword

When I was 23, I had a master's degree in English from a reputable state university, and I went off for my first full-time teaching job. I had taught composition (at least I had presided over composition classes), but I had not yet taught literature. I had no way of knowing, then, that there would be days that fall on which I would sneak into my classroom building at 6:00 a.m., shortly after the janitor opened up, and write on the blackboard, "Miss Wyman will not be here today." I soon discovered, you see, that because I had not yet read most of the literature in our anthology for Intro to Lit and because I had no notes on many of the authors whose works were contained in that text, I simply had nothing to say. Furthermore, I had never heard anybody talk on "the short story" or "the poem," and I had little idea what those genres were about.

Then as now, of course, most young teachers received the texts they were about to teach from on the day they reported for work. I might not have come had I discovered any earlier that I could not read Joyce's "Clay" and that the only thing I had to say about Welty's "A Visit of Charity" was that the description of Marian resembles that of Red Riding Hood. For the first weeks of that fall, I would assign three or four short stories per night and hope that I would understand one of them well enough to conduct class on it two days hence; when I could not, I would go in and write, "Miss Wyman will not be here today."

When I could read a short story, I would simply go to class and, by questioning of sorts, lead my students through what I had gone through to make some sense of the story. I had no idea that there was any kind of "method" in that; the only time I had ever heard the word pedagogy, I had assumed that it was being mispronounced. Besides, I was into survival, not theory.

Our term had started in mid-September, and at the clip I assigned short stories, our supply was soon used up. By the time "the town below lay leaved in October blood," there was nothing to do but move on to poetry.

I did not understand most of the eight-page introduction to the poetry part of our text, but two passages made an impression on me, and I underlined them--with a ruler; having something to underline was a solemn experience.

1. A poem is more concise than its prose parallel.
2. The paraphrase is an impressionistic description written in indifferent prose.

I really can't tell you much of what we did that term on the days when I

was not sick at my stomach and went on to class. I think there were times when we worked up to the indifferent prose of some paraphrases--that we spent, in fact, a good bit of time in constructing prose parallels less concise than their poetic forebears.

The semester was over before I had time to think about how I had got myself in the situation I was in. I had known from high school that I would be an English teacher. I had graduated from my junior college with honors. In senior college my English grades were B's with an occasional A. I loved listening to my professors, though--enough that I took 55 hours in English--and I knew that I could do much better any time I took a notion to. In the year of graduate school I devoted myself to my studies and reversed the ratio of A's to B's. Throughout my college experience, my professors had been interesting enough to keep me on for seven courses more than I'd been required to take. They were articulate beyond anyone that I had ever heard, and I had almost always enjoyed, and sometimes been thrilled by, their accounts of poets' lives, their descriptions of individual works, and their brilliant generalizations about styles, themes, trends, characteristics, and periods.

What my professors had not done, however, was to teach me to read. In fairness, it may be that my junior college teachers thought my senior college ones would do it; it may be that the latter (including the author of a well-known guide to poetry now in its fifth edition--a man with whom I took nine hours) assumed that the job had already been done. Certainly in graduate school, that was the case: my professor of Spenser, assuming apparently that everything had been done, assigned me forthwith a paper on the relationship of metrics to meaning in "The Shepheardes Calendar." The professor with whom I took modern poetry, on the other hand, read aloud to us a great deal, attempted not to intrude on the aesthetic experiences thus generated by saying anything more than Mmmmm, and, when I had completed an annotated bibliography on Robert Penn Warren, gave me an A.

Whatever had caused me to be in the condition I was in, I determined that my students would never be in it. I kept on trying to learn to read, gradually became alert to the ways in which the poet effects his blessed conciseness, and pulled my students along through whatever processes taught me whatever I learned. It was apparent early on, though, that my classes were not to be much like those of my professors. Their classes had, for the most part, been quite neat: they seemed to know where class would start and where and when it would end. Questions from students concerned such things as details of authors' lives and dates of tests. My teachers apparently had exactly the amount of discussion they wanted (almost none). I could recall having spoken only twice in English class during my junior and senior years, and this fact had not even made me stand out in a crowd. Nor had it made me unhappy: the classroom was clearly a place for the displaying of knowledge, there was no way that my knowledge could compare with that of my professors, and I was perfectly content with letting them do the talking. Indeed, it was no surprise to me to learn that one of my former professors, a kind and learned man, had been chosen to do two literature courses on television when the university moved to televised lectures for groups of 350 students. He was modest, attractive, and able to give out more information in 50 minutes than I had previously thought possible. He was a paragon, at the top of the talented group of lecturers by whom I had been taught. I hope it will not

seem harsh when I say, though, that there was almost no element of risk in their classes: they might all have been on TV. Indeed, I do not mean to be glib when I say that they risked almost nothing except the possibility that I would not learn to read literature, and I did not learn it. I did not remember enough to teach as I had been taught, and I did not have the time to acquire for myself the wealth of literary history that I had forgotten.

Besides, as the "Miss Wyman will not be here" mornings began to subside, I promised myself that my students would never be in the shape I had been in: they would learn to read. I vowed not to tell them anything. Without knowing it, I had entered upon twenty years of Socratic questioning, a sort of "directed close reading," based on the premise that if students could simply learn to ask the right questions, they could learn to read poetry.

I assumed the role of chief questioner, my rationale being that my questions would provide models of question-asking for my students. I got to be very good at my game: there was nothing I could not ask questions about--no poem, it seemed, that would not yield its meaning to my inquiry. How an hour of questions -many of them about syntax and pronoun antecedents--could make a Keats ode available and alive to my students was one of life's wonderful mysteries, to them and to me. But we knew that it worked.

There is risk involved, certainly, in this procedure--far more risk than a lecturer ever knows, at least in the hour while he's lecturing. Some questions evoke no utterance at all. Right questions sometimes result nonetheless in wrong answers, and though wrong answers will almost always give way before still better questions, the questioner risks that his students may lose the poem in a blinding demonstration of logic, or that he himself may simply run out of time. The temptation to "tell" and have everything neat once more must be daily forsworn, and one must always, as Dylan Thomas says, leave room for something to "creep, crawl, crash, or thunder in."

I continue to learn how to read poetry, and I no longer feel apologetic for spending my class time in sharing with my students the things I have discovered. That is what I am about, in fact: helping them become independent readers of poetry. From the articles included in this journal, I am encouraged in that effort. The persons whose work is published here proceed neither by formulas or by rote in teaching their students to read and to write poetry. They know that they take risks in teaching as they do, but they will not risk having their students become automatons. How poems happen at all is at last, of course, a mystery. How they happen in readers is a mystery, too. In effect, the writers whose articles on teaching students to read poetry are included in this issue propose that we teach poetry in such a way that that mystery not come until the last.

Summoning the Poem: Several Roads to Xanadu

Ben F. Nelms

Poetry, like Latin, may be disappearing from the common curriculum in America. Please don't misunderstand. I am not worried about the survival of poetry. Like opera and ballet, which are not now and never were included in the common studies of American children and adolescents, poetry will survive and flourish. Aficionados will still subscribe to little (and little known) magazines, recite favorite lines at the drop of a hat, gather in small groups to compare the merits of James Wright and James Dickey or wonder what ever happened to W. D. Snodgrass. Occasionally a star may appear and be as widely known and quoted as Beverly Sills or Mikhail Baryshnikov, Robert Frost or e. e. cummings. Poetry will survive.

And neither am I worried that children will not find poetry. The vitality, precision and playfulness in language which are at the heart of the poetic impulse will continue to attract generation after generation. The story of the Pied Piper is not an idle myth. They will find verse (and worse) in poster art and greeting card, bathroom graffiti and skip rope rhymes, pep yells and communal insults, rock lyrics and rapping, Rod McKuen and Leaves of Gold. The impulse to turn from the prosaic to verse--chants, songs, sayings, litanies, and lines--will survive outside the classroom. Its traditions may already be stronger outside the classroom than in and may even be better adapted to the rhythms of the "real world" than the hothouse climate of Miss Fidditch's poetry unit. (If this were an oral presentation, I would stop here and read John Updike's "The Poetess" and Marianne Moore's "Poetry.")

What does worry me is what the virtual disappearance of poetry from the common curriculum will mean to the schools, for it would represent another example of what Herbert Kliebard has called "the most persistent problem that humanism has had to face in the twentieth century": "its inability to reconcile its central doctrine with the realities of mass public education" (Ladner 7). The widening gulf between the aficionados and the popular imagination--probably natural and maybe healthy in the "real" world--is more problematical for the humanities curriculum in the schools, a curriculum that always seems on the verge of vanishing entirely. Awareness of the gulf has always been at the center of our tension in teaching literature. Alan Purves, writing at what he probably thought was the beginning of a new era in the teaching of literature, described the tension aptly: "Given a group of students who, teachers were sure, preferred baseball and Batman to espresso and Faulkner, one simply had to present them with the best of 'classical culture' from Sophocles to Joseph Conrad and trust that a larger percentage would end up subscribing to the Book-of-the-Month" (How Porcupines Make Love 7). This quotation is taken from a

book which was designed to promulgate what Purves then called "a response-centered curriculum." The response-centered curriculum, at least as it was envisioned by the writers of that book, never came about. Instead, it seems to me that there are now two competing models of literature teaching in elementary and secondary schools: the anthology-based curriculum against which Purves and his colleagues were reacting and a student-centered curriculum in which teaching revolves around random response to popular, contemporary fiction, especially "young adult" problem novels, and very little poetry. The latter concentrates on meeting the students where they are more than nudging them up a reading ladder.

Ironically, the decline of poetry in the schools has come during a period which has witnessed the triumph of Reading. Not only are elementary teachers in our schools first and foremost Reading teachers, but also there is a whole array of school personnel called Reading Specialists (who have achieved what has eluded English teachers for a hundred years--a reasonable class load). Teachers of all subjects in secondary school are encouraged to be teachers of Reading, as they should be indeed. But, in addition, most secondary schools now employ Reading teachers and specialists who preside over a variety of classes (again of reasonable size) sometimes called Remedial Reading, Basic Reading, Developmental Reading, or Enriched Reading. In one school district, I have just learned, all seventh graders identified as reading six months below grade level will be placed in Special Reading classes this fall. I continue to stand in awe of the ability of Reading Specialists to measure children's growth as readers. Only astrologers have charts that purport to be more accurate and comprehensive in placing and predicting human achievement and potential. The last few years have been a veritable Golden Age of Reading in the schools. One would think in such an environment literature, including poetry, would have flourished. Not so. The Reading teacher and the English teacher still glare at each other across a wide gulf. The old-style humanist and the self-styled neo-humanist glare at each other across another gulf. The one is likely to emphasize close critical analysis of recognized texts; the other, honest, personal responses to "relevant" texts. Back-to-the-basics populists and back-to-the-classics elitists have become strange bedfellows in protesting "the rising tide of mediocrity" that both see engulfing modern public schools, but neither party has brought new vision or new vigor to the teaching of literature, especially poetry. It's hard to imagine that either party would agree--at least not in actual practice--with Northrup Frye's assertion:

> If literature is to be properly taught, we have to start at its center, which is poetry, then work outward to literary prose, then outward from there to applied languages of business and professions and ordinary life. Poetry is the most direct and simple means of expressing oneself in words: the most primitive nations have poetry, but only quite well developed nations can produce good prose (121).

Knowing this state of things, the widening gap between educationists and humanists, I should have been less optimistic when I heard that the two parts of the yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education in 1984

were to be devoted to reading and the humanities. I should have recognized the two antagonists in the old argument about American public education even in the form and wording of the titles of the volumes when they were announced: Becoming Readers in a Complex Society and The Humanities in Precollegiate Education. The first (a verbal, naturally) would emphasize process, the needs and interests of individual learners, and the demands of contemporary society. The second (a noun phrase, of course) would emphasize intellectual and aesthetic artifacts, intellectual discipline, a well-defined body of knowledge, and a common heritage from the past. Both in their own way are excellent--among the best such volumes to have been issued by NSSE or any other professional association in education in recent years. But as a teacher of literature, with a particular interest in poetry, I was disappointed. I would have hoped that both volumes would emphasize the centrality of literature, including poetry, in reading and the humanities and that there would have been some degree of congruence between the two documents, at least an agreement on what the issues are and a recognition and honest appraisal of each other's viewpoint.

It is clear from the first volume that becoming readers in our complex society does not involve, in any significant way, becoming readers of literature, particularly poetry. The message is made clear more by omission and subtle matters of emphasis than by direct statement or argument. Though the reading of literature is mentioned in passing throughout, usually in terms of light recreational reading, only once is it given the kind of serious attention that merits an item in the topical index. That section, which occurs in the essay by Richard Beach and Deborah Appleman entitled "Reading Strategies for Expository and Literary Text Types," focuses almost exclusively on narrative fiction and non-fiction and, finally, contains little more than a summary and application of the four basic types of literary response formulated by Purves and others for use in content analysis studies, i.e., engagement, description, interpretation, and evaluation.

The very use of the term text throughout the book (not always consistent from one author to another) would likely antagonize most of the authors of the humanities volume. For example, Jerome C. Harste and Larry J. Mikulecky in their splendid essay, "The Context of Literacy in Our Society," define the concept of text that dominates the essays in the volume, though other authors use the term itself differently:

> When applied to a specific instance of reading, the notion of demonstration means that a "surface text" offers a potential set of meanings. For this reason it is useful to talk of a surface text as a "text potential" and what a reader creates in his or her head as a "text". . . .Reading involves not only maintenance of the author's meaning but generation of new meaning. This is not a problem but a potential. Similarly, language users can read a selection and yet, in rereading, discover new meanings. The "surface text" has not changed, though clearly the "text" has (58).

Though Harste allows for preservation of the author's meaning, it is clear that he and his colleagues are more interested in the generation of new meanings, in the interaction between text and reader, in the processes of making meaning

rather than the discipline of discovering meaning. And the very expression of the dichotomy itself disallows the possibility that the text itself might have meaning independent of either author or reader. Text, from this point of view, is firmly placed in the minds of individual readers, not in the words on the page, which are "surface text" or "text potential." In spite of the recent discussions of structuralism, post-structuralism, and reader-response criticism, most traditional humanists schooled as they are in close textual analysis and the literary theories associated with the "New" Criticism (e.g., the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy) are likely to find this attitude toward the text cavalier if not downright diabolical.

This condescending attitude toward text (as words on the page) is never clearer nor more frustrating than in the essay by P. David Pearson and Robert J. Tierney entitled "On Becoming a Thoughtful Reader: Learning to Read like a Writer." They begin with a remarkably clear and accurate explanation of the process of reading. For example, they state, "The text is but a blueprint for meaning; the reader must create her own image of what the edifice looks like. That image is her model of meaning, what she will pass on to her inner reader" (150). This metaphor leads to an understanding of the dynamic tension involved in the active process of reading: "The point is that every reader strives for that fit between her current working model and the data she interprets to be in the blueprint (the text on the page). Homeostasis and equilibrium are the goals of model building" (151).

However, the section of the essay that deals with practical application to the teaching of thoughtful reading divides the "juggling act called reading" into three areas of emphasis: thoughtfulness to self, thoughtfulness to author, and thoughtfulness to text. Under the heading, thoughtfulness to author, the writers include a detailed consideration of devices the author uses to accomplish his purposes as author, including structure, figurative language, irony and various genres: in other words, "forms the author uses to achieve different functions" (160). They illustrate this point with a remarkable display of the nuances of meaning that a close textual reading yields. They debate with themselves momentarily whether this kind of reading should be considered thoughtfulness to the author or thoughtfulness to the reader and eventually opt for the former. Finally, when they arrive at the section on thoughtfulness to the text they are curiously apologetic:

> We have puzzled ourselves to the point of exasperation over this section. We are not certain whether a reader can (or should) ever read with thoughtfulness to the text. In fact, we are not certain that the text on the page ever really exists, save in the trivial sense of ink marks on paper. Yet, we know, by virtue of surveys of secondary readers' habits, that there is at least a negative sense in which a reader can read with grave thoughtfulness to text: to read to be able to regurgitate or recognize statements that literally did occur in that epiphenomenal mixture of ink and paper (168).

Ultimately, and somewhat begrudgingly, they decide that there is one occasion when thoughtfulness to the text is appropriate: the reading of a poem, short

story, or novel. Readers might miss the meaning of a line of poetry, for example, if they misread the meter. Even this concession, however, is related to the relationship between an author and a reader:

> We believe there can be a time in the reading of what must have been a carefully crafted piece of literature at which it is important to get the text off the page loyally and faithfully. The author took great care in deciding how the text should 'fit' on the page; a reader can spend at least a little time trying to appreciate that fit (169).

But there follows a quick disclaimer: "Now we do not want our reader to stall in this suspended state of neutrality. . . ." So much for text.

Now I don't want to be pessimistic. But I fear that, in spite of Pearson and Tierney's best intentions, what this advice will lead to is the old habit of reading for meaning most of the year (somebody's meaning--author's? teacher's? maybe student's?) and taking time off once a year to stop and define iambs and tetrameters and quatrains and talk about how lovely the language of a poet is, then after the temporary embarrassment scurry quickly back to things that say what they mean without beating around the bush.

I think I understand why these writers try so desperately to redefine the issue of text, to avoid the old concept of "the autonomous text." I think the reason is that in many instances the tyranny of text has proven an excuse for the exercise of the tyranny of an informed teacher over an uninformed student, for the teacher to impress his young charges with his own brilliance by telling them what the poem means rather than helping them discover for themselves what the poem means, which is another way of saying helping them discover what the poem means <u>to</u> themselves. Whatever terminology one uses for text--"surface text," "text potential," "blueprint," "epiphenomenal mixture of ink and paper"--, the fundamental concepts seem to me the same: reading is a dynamic, active, individual process and the words on the page are central to the process. When one reads,

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure dome decree
> Where Alph the sacred river ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea

one may ask oneself what do the words <u>Xanadu</u>, <u>Kubla Khan</u>, <u>pleasure dome</u>, <u>sacred river</u>, <u>caverns measureless</u> and <u>sunless sea</u> mean to me, or one may ask what they meant to Coleridge, or one may ask what they mean to other readers or may have meant to other readers in the past, or one may ask the simple question that is a truncated version of all of the above, what do these words <u>mean</u>. In any case, the emphasis for the moment is on <u>these words</u>, not on what I usually think or think these words ordinarily might mean as words, but on what I think these words mean in this context. And not on what Coleridge usually thought or said or might have meant in other contexts by these words, but on what he let them mean in these lines, in this association with one another. Therefore, though I am a bit disappointed that the writers of Part I of the NSSE yearbook did not apply their model of reading more explicitly to poetry and other literature, I think it would be a mistake not to make that application.

I think they are straining at the gnat to swallow the camel in their dogmatic insistence that true text is in the mind and not on the page and that the reader has little or no obligation to the words on the page. However, I applaud Pearson and Tierney's use of "homeostasis" and "equilibrium" as descriptive terms for the goals of the reading process. That is, the reader's efforts are directed to achieve a fit between the model of the poem in his or her mind and the data supplied by the "blueprint," which is the text on the page. Sometimes in actual practice, as I will argue a bit later, we have to be content with a fairly rough fit to begin with. I have been intrigued by many poems for many years, taking a great deal of pleasure in reading and re-reading each one, when I knew that there were bits and pieces of my response that seemed erratic or, at best, idiosyncratic when I tried to trace their sources in the text of the poem.

On first reading, this emphasis on process and the active response of neophyte readers, and the tendency to locate meaning in the mind of the reader rather than in the textual evidence of the poem--both ideas at the heart of the model of reading presented in Part I of the NSSE yearbook--would seem to be totally at odds with the approach to the humanities presented in Part II of the same yearbook. Much of that volume reads like an advertisement for St. John's College, the National Humanities Faculty and the Paideia Proposal (which itself reads like an advertisement for the Great Books, not surprisingly since four of its credited authors are associated with Encyclopedia Britannica, publishers of the Great Books).

However, Elliot Eisner's sensible essay, "Can the Humanities Be Taught in American Public Schools?" is practical, down-to-earth, thought-provoking and full of good advice:

> If students are to develop the skills needed to read literature, they need opportunities to read literature. The idea that students can develop such skills on non-literary material and then apply them to literature or poetry underestimates the extent to which different forms make different intellectual demands upon students. The acquisition of reading skills and the content to be read are not independent activities. With respect to the school curriculum, this implies that a program of study be defined in which a significant array of humanistic literature, including poetry, be available as an ongoing part of the school day, that such material be selected so as to be compatible with the existing reading competencies of students, and that such material serve as the basis for discussion (123).

Even so, the emphasis of his essay is on the importance of established artifacts of our culture, the intellectual discipline necessary to apprehand them, and the moral urgency of the humanist's task:

> The book, as vehicle, can be an escape from "reality" or a means of access to it; it can lead one away from significant human issues or it can present them vividly

> to our consciousness. What we regard as great books written by great writers emphasize the significant, not the trivial. They help us see more clearly the world in which we live. They do not lead us away from that world (123).

On the other hand, what could be seen as a stultifying high seriousness in his style and in the substance of his pronouncements is balanced with clear-headed common sense: his emphasis on "the encouragement of diverse but relevant interpretations," and "the importance of discussion," his insistence that "no single method has a monopoly upon inquiry," and his reminder that "the contemporary world that students inhabit provides an enormously rich source of material for humanistic inquiry" (123, 116, 125). Eisner's essay, however, is typical of much of the best writing in this volume--moving and persuasive as polemic but without a very clear view of real children or real texts that they might read or the real schools in which the two are to be brought into interaction with one another.

In two brief and shining pieces, which might easily be overlooked in this otherwise rather ponderous volume, Robert Coles and Benjamin DeMott address this imbalance. Coles cites the actual words of a New Orleans high school student responding to A Tale of Two Cities and to the classroom in which it was assigned and of a white child who lived in New Orleans during the school integration crisis of the early 1960s. Both use language to "try to figure out this world, its endless puzzles, paradoxes, inconsistencies" (35). At the same time, both take risks, express their own vulnerability in their words, and are unembarrassed by the mystery of human experience. "For so many of us the point is security, certainty--the eradication of all ambiguity. No wonder we veer strongly to multiple-choice tests, to summaries and more summaries--of plots, of positions, of policies" (37). Where we have learned this attitude, this obsession with certainty, Coles suggests, is in a succession of classrooms, classrooms in which the only questions allowed to be raised are those to which there are irrefutable answers.

Benjamin DeMott in his essay on "the summoning reader" describes a very different classroom and gives an example of how a teacher might prepare to teach a scene from Macbeth in such a way as to avoid such pedestrian class environment. For the teacher of poetry, DeMott's credo is based on three fundamental concepts: (1) Reading is seen as a collaboration between the reader and the text. He quotes Emerson, "We animate what we see; we see only what we animate."

> Texts or events become appreciable when awakened to life in time: when they are drawn near, that is, registered as moment-to-moment continuums of action and response. And the quality of the human performance in summoning-to-life depends on the subtlety and force of the individual constructive imagination (130).

(2) The classroom is seen as a community of thinkers.

> Membership in the classroom community carries with it the expectation that summonings and imaginings will be

> turned out for public assessment. Students are free both to criticize each other's deeds of animation and to borrow from them. And they are aided by the example of a teacher--a more or less experienced and knowledgeable elder whose performance as animator can be imitated (131).

(3) Texts are flexible. "A poem is an act; you have to get into the act," is an epigram that he quotes with obvious relish. The chief activity of the classroom is "the close imagining of texts." Teachers and students work to improve and control the processes "by which summoners create experience in time from black parts on printed pages" (131). DeMott promises, in a footnote, that a book-length presentation of his case, to be entitled The Summoning Reader, is forthcoming. Though I look forward to it eagerly, I cannot think that it will be clearer or more persuasive than this brief essay, especially in the extended example on Macbeth which I must refrain from summarizing.

At this point it should be clear that the model of reading presented by most of the writers in the first part of the NSSE yearbook and the value of the humanities curriculum projected by the writers of the second part have come together. It is from this point of agreement that I think the teacher of poetry should begin. Readers of poetry are seen as active participants in making meaning, in summoning to life words on the page. Classrooms are seen as interpretive communities in which students learn from one another and in which the teacher is a wise guide in the reading process. Texts of poems are seen as "blueprints," repositories of potential meaning, deserving and rewarding close attention. The difference between DeMott's phrase, "close imagining of texts" (a verbal, naturally), and the more usual "close textual analysis" (a noun phrase, of course) is subtle but highly significant in practice, the former suggesting the dynamic rather than the static, the constructive rather than the contemplative, an open-ended process rather than a finished product, and a personal activity rather than an impersonal document.

Perhaps more valuable to the teacher of poetry than either of the parts of the NSSE yearbook is an unobtrusive little volume of the Kentucky English Bulletin which quietly appeared on the list of resources available from NCTE recently and which one wishes the NSSE writers had read. Its title is The Responding Reader: Nine New Approaches to Teaching Literature. Beginning with the essay, "It Is the Poem that I Remake" by Joseph Comprone, it presents variations on the kind of classroom activity envisioned by Coles and DeMott. Comprone sets the tone with his opening assertion:

> Structuralists and reader-response critics encourage teachers to make the 'act' of reading the central concern in our teaching, just as many educational theorists in the 20th century have encouraged teachers to move from a focus on subject to a focus on students as they learn (5).

What appears below is my own variation of the same kind of classroom and owes much, as does the Kentucky English Bulletin, to recent reader-response criticism such as that collected by Jane P. Tompkins in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980).

If the "act" of reading poetry is to be the central focus in the teaching of poetry, then it follows that teachers of poetry must study not only poems but the "act" of reading poems. We are conditioned to present in our publications and in our lectures to students the finished product of our struggles--an interpretation of a poem. What they never see are the waverings, the hesitations, the false starts, the frantic searches for secondary sources, the conversations with colleagues, the sudden insights, the methodical analysis and research, the personal associations, both erratic and illuminating, that preceded our present understanding of Blake's "Tyger" or Eliot's "Prufrock" or Donne's "Canonization" or Keats' "Grecian Urn." And what many students would never guess is that there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of poems that we have read and never understood, and that there are just as many more that we read, understand easily, and find pleasureable but do not find worthy of teaching, perhaps precisely because they are not "difficult" enough or do not present enough of a challenge to be interesting to us.

What the profession probably needs are more genuine accounts of individual readers coming to terms with individual texts, especially poems. It would probably be helpful to us all, both as teachers and readers, to have complete records of the attempts of experienced, knowledgeable readers to achieve what Pearson and Tierney call "homeostasis" and "equilibrium" in the reading of a poem. Lacking such professional road maps of this largely unexplored territory, we must rely on our own experience as readers and students. We must avoid the temptation to be doctrinaire in the instructions we give young readers. For example, I cannot, with any shred of honesty, say that the first thing you must do in reading a poem is to identify the rhythm, meter and rhyme scheme. I have known too many poems and cared about them and understood them (at least at some level of satisfaction) before I bothered to scan the lines or chart the rhyme scheme. I remember my surprise, upon first preparing to teach Sylvia Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," to learn that it rhymes. I had been reading and admiring the poem for many years, enjoying its imagery, its subtle ironies, its structure, its word play, and its echoes of other poems, and had simply not noticed rhymes. This is not to deny that the sound of the poem may have been a major part of my enjoyment of the poem, but I had not been conscious of this element. Knowing about the rhymes adds another dimension to my pleasure, but I got along fine without it for a good long time. In other words, my experience as a reader teaches me that we do not have to apply every critical tool that we have to every reading of every poem. To appear to do so may make the "act" of reading poetry seem to the young reader an onerous burden, a task more threatening than inviting.

Through the years I have derived a set of personal principles that guide me in the teaching of poetry. I present these not as a creed or a manifesto or even as a description of my own unvarying practice. I freely adapt or ignore my own principles (at least in this case) when it is convenient to do so. However, I have found them handy as a sort of checklist or a reminder of the kinds of things that might be done in any given situation. To illustrate them, from time to time I will refer to my teaching of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." I do so because I have used it in demonstration lessons many times and because the use of it lets me avoid the issue of whether or not I am infringing on somebody's copyright. But I will refer to it merely to illustrate a few points. I will not present an entire lesson plan or (God forbid!

after what I have said so far in this essay) a complete critical analysis of the poem.

1. LET THE POEMS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. From nursery rhymes on, children and young people should hear poems read aloud--many poems, poems that speak directly to their ear, to their mind, to their imagination, without intervention by teacher or interpreter. On these occasions, if the children choose to initiate a conversation themselves, so be it. But they should not be prodded. It would be pleasant to think that children's homes would be saturated with the sound of poetry and that the task of letting children hear poetry would not be exclusively the school's. Such is usually not the case. I confess that, even if all families were reading poems frequently, I would be prone to include the oral reading of poems in both my planned and spontaneous lessons. Teachers who are serious about introducing youngsters to the pleasure of poetry reading should be generous in scheduling times for this relaxed, informal, non-directed sharing of poems. Just a few minutes two or three times a week for one or two poems will do more to induct young readers into poetry reading than the same amount of time concentrated, with all the best intentions, into a marathon poetry unit.

Letting the poems speak for themselves is also an important part of the more formal teaching of poetry. One of the best ways to prepare for the serious study of a challenging poem is to read several less challenging, more immediately rewarding poems on the same topic or theme or by the same author. Before beginning a unit on William Wordsworth or Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson, read several short, pithy, fairly direct poems by these authors to establish an ear for the form of the poems, a mind-set for the author's prominent themes, and an eye for their recurrent images, all this without analysis or even extensive comment except as it is volunteered by the students.

Finally, in the study of any individual poem, it is generally a good idea to read the poem through at least once, sometimes more than once, perhaps with students following along in the text, perhaps before they are given the text of the poem. With "Kubla Khan" I read the poem aloud and conduct a preliminary discussion before giving students a copy of the text. I want them to hear the "music" of the poem--its insistent rhythms, meter and rhymes--before they see it on the page. I also want them to hear it as sentences--meaningful units of discourse--before they see it as lines. If they do, it makes sense to them, at least on a literal level, from the very beginning. Finally, even in my fairly amateurish oral interpretation, the tone of voice, intonations, facial expressions and gestures suggest, without arguing for it, a sense of the overall meaning of the poem. For other poems, I might begin with a silent reading before the oral reading, but always in the course of the lesson I would incorporate an uninterrupted oral reading of the poem. Often, after the lesson, with all the discussion, comment and analysis fresh in mind, I will return to an oral reading of the poem.

2. LET THE CHILDREN SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. You may substitute <u>adolescents</u> or <u>adults</u> if you teach students in these age categories, but at this stage I am specifically interested in the "child-like" element in all readers, the untutored response, the spontaneous first impression, the unsophisticated

candor, the unembarrassed questions and curiosity. At this point, the teacher's role is as recorder and observer. This can be a valuable period of preparation for the teacher in determining what does not need to be taught because it is already understood, what should be taught, and what probably cannot be taught yet because students simply aren't ready. The method is simple. In a timed freewriting or brief brainstorming session, ask students to tell you about their first impression of the poem: what did they see as they heard the poem? what did it remind them of? what questions do they have? what did it make them think of? At this point, they should not be asked what they think the poem means or how good a poem they think it is. In fact, inasmuch as possible at this point one wants to encourage an open mind and to prevent premature interpretation or evaluation.

The purpose of this activity is not to arrive at an understanding of the poem, but to explore the responses of several readers. It is not to close doors but to open windows. What are the possibilities in this poem? How could so many people have seen so much that is so different? What common threads are there in the group's responses? What is there in the poem and what is there in our background of experience that lead us to respond as we did? In these preliminary brainstorming sessions students will recall most of the dominant images of "Kubla Khan." Some of them will have begun to visualize quite concretely pleasure domes and caves of ice. Many will have personal associations with parts of the poem, e.g. Olivia Newton-John's Xanadu, rock lyrics that have borrowed from the poem, the Great Wall of China, mountain dulcimers, various rivers and waterfalls and oceans and icy caverns, maybe even Xanadu in Citizen Kane. These associations may prove more or less relevant, but they are a part of the students' initial thinking, and the teacher does well to know about them. At this point, they are accepted and recorded without judgment or comment. They are as much a part of the raw material for the "juggling act" called reading as the words on the page. The "fit" between the model and the blueprint, as I suggested earlier, may be fairly rough at this point.

3. LET THE TEXTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. Having responded freely and personally for as long as necessary, the readers are now asked to be data collectors. Having seen and responded to the poem as a whole, they now look at its parts arranged as they are on the page in a linear fashion. Really only one question predominates at this stage: What can you know for sure from the data before you? Of course, readers may speculate, frame hypotheses, and raise questions for one another, but as data collectors they rigorously separate these functions from the documentary evidence. (In Linda Wyman's essay on the teaching of a sonnet of Keats', reprinted in this journal, you have a fine example of the kind of activity best generated at this stage in the "act" of reading.)

When I teach "Kubla Khan," I begin with the title. What can we know for sure from this data? The only tools outside the text itself that I usually use are a good dictionary and a desk encyclopedia. As a matter of fact, the Concise Columbia Encyclopedia supplies all the information about Kublai Khan that is needed for a first reading--and more. Then I go on to the first sentence in the poem, quoted earlier in this paper (p. 5), usually proceeding in sentences or other logical grammatical units rather than by lines or

stanzas. This sentence, inverted as it is, provides data to answer the familiar journalist questions: who? what? where? and maybe why? What can we know for sure about Kubla Khan from this sentence? What did he do? What does this tell us about him? What can we know about Xanadu? (The dictionaries and encyclopedias are not much help here, so we have to stick with the evidence in the poem.) What do we know for sure about the place where Kubla decreed his pleasure dome? At this point, one would have elicited four of the controlling images of the poem: the dome, the river, the caverns, and the sea. One can already see a series of contrasts: the river and the sea, the dome and the caverns,the pleasure for which the dome is intended and the more forbidding elements in the measureless caverns and the sunless sea, and the like. Kubla will have been established as a doer, a commander, a man in control, one who issues decrees and probably expects them to be obeyed. The next sentence, of course, will fulfill the expectation already set up, but with a little twist--what Wolfgang Iser would call a gap in the text, an element of indeterminacy, a momentary frustration for the reader. Nothing is said about the dome being built, only walls and towers girdling twice five miles of fertile ground.

> So twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round;
> And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
> Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
> And here were forests ancient as the hills,
> Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

How readers deal with these indeterminate elements has to do with the subject of the next stage of the "act" of reading and relates particularly to what Benjamin DeMott called the summoning of the poem.

Before I proceed to that, one word of caution: The detailed questioning suggested at this stage requires a good deal of tact on the part of the teacher. Many students respond positively to the element of detective work suggested here. But many do not. One must know one's students and not force poems upon them which require more detective work than they are ready for. Select poems that will reward just as many questions as students can handle (maybe expect them to stretch just a little), but avoid poems of such complexity and such indeterminacy that the whole questioning process becomes burdensome and confusing. One learns to read poems and to enjoy reading poems by reading poems of gradually increasing complexity. For discussions of poems to be stimulating and lively, there probably should be a little surprise or twist in the text, just a bit of a problem to be solved. Not all students should be required to study "Kubla Khan" or to study it in the detail that I am suggesting here. For those who are ready, a systematic questioning process, as DeMott says, "lends a sense of manageability to the ongoing experience, fitting it to familiar rhythms of anticipation and recognition, proposing and disposing" (137).

4. LET THE READERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. This activity involves making connections, drawing inferences, or arriving at conclusions. It is always preceded by the one described in the previous section. In actual practice, the two happen in such close conjunction that they are seldom perceived by the reader as two separate activities. For purposes of learning the process of reading, it is worth separating them in the minds of students and teachers.

Because all readers must make connections for themselves, the wise teacher allows for a great deal of latitude here. The teacher cannot make the connections for students nor force students to agree with one another about the connections they make. This diversity can be the ground of celebration. Or it can be a source of frustration, if teachers or their students can be satisfied only with the sense of certainty and the absence of ambiguity and mystery that Robert Coles decried. Usually, however, there will be enough common ground, enough sense of agreement, to satisfy even fairly insecure readers.

I like Wolfgang Iser's analogy for this activity:

> The impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual, but only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The "stars" in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination--he has the whole panoply of [poetic] techniques at his disposal--but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the <u>whole</u> picture before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text (Tompkins 57).

Of course, the distinction between what Iser calls "stars" and "lines" in his analogy or between what I have called data in the previous section and connections in this one is precisely the same as the distinction between "text potential" and the real text made by Harste and Mikulecky or between "blueprint" and "model" made by Pearson and Tierney. In actual practice, I think that neither the reading theorists nor the staunchest "New" critics would want to ignore nor even deemphasize either. In the classroom I think it is worth keeping the distinctions in mind and giving each devil its due.

For instance, with the first few lines of "Kubla Khan," I might invite students to make some connections between the pleasure dome that the Khan decreed and the walls and towers that he got. Why did the building of a pleasure dome require the enclosure of ten square miles of land? What might the walls have kept in? What might the walls have kept out? Though the class might reach some sort of consensus, I would expect individual students' answers to vary--probably on the basis of their experience with walls and towers and pleasure palaces, more specifically with whether they have had more experience with walls that keep things in or walls that keep things out. At any rate, probably the class will agree that Kubla did not intend to perfect the whole countryside, just his circumscribed corner of it. His walls might have been necessary to keep predators and invaders out, or keep his servants and the pleasures of his dome in, or simply as a demarcation of the boundary of the part of his world that he is perfecting.

Though readers make predictions and build models on the basis of the previous data and their previous experience, they must keep an open mind to the text as it unfolds if their model is to match the blueprint in the text. In this particular poem, for example, the next few lines partly specify what is walled in: gardens and forests. As a matter of fact, a great deal of data is provided about these gardens and forests; so we revert to our role as data collectors. However, even after we garner all the data that these lines will yield, we are left with another kind of "gap," one slightly different from that described by Iser. Though we know that the gardens have "sinuous rills" and "many an incense-bearing tree," we are left free in our imaginations to build up our own visual images of these gardens. They don't have to match Coleridge's or the ideal reader's or the teacher's or mine. Nobody's garden is wrong.

5. LET READERS SPEAK TO EACH OTHER. For many years, partly because of my own misunderstanding of New Critical advice, I thought that the reading of poetry should be a lonely and fiercely independent business. Depending upon someone else's reading was not cricket. Of course, I continued to read explications (almost as avidly as I read poems), but deep down I thought that if I were a truly successful reader or the text were a truly successful poem I should not have to rely on any secondary sources. I still think that readers of poetry should be able to trust their own readings and should not feel at the mercy of some interpretive high priest to illuminate The Meaning. However, as in everything else I teach, I have come to the view that knowledge is generally communal, that the understanding of those texts that a community finds worth preserving will probably have been derived by community efforts and will be shared in the same ways that all other communal knowledge is shared.

Therefore, I encourage readers of poetry to share their responses with one another, to borrow freely from one another, to argue freely with one another, to revise and modify and correct and adopt and abandon each other's views as well as their own previously held ones. Of course, this process goes on in the classroom simultaneously with #3 and #4, but it would not have to. The previous stages could be experienced by each reader individually. In fact, they should be (by way of written assignments or silent reading and meditation) often enough that readers will not feel wholly dependent upon a reading group. Letting readers speak to each other, however, requires the participation of a supportive group and a climate of mutual respect and the free exchange of ideas.

At this stage, teachers may serve as "elders" or models, i.e., older, more experienced readers, able to offer fruitful suggestions and, occasionally, alternative readings. (This <u>must not</u>, however, be "the answer at the back of the book" or the right answer which students have simply been trying to guess. Teachers' contributions must be subtle and supplementary, not intended to dazzle young readers or demonstrate their inadequacy.) Sometimes, perhaps not often, I think it is a good idea to share other readers' interpretations of a poem. With "Kubla Khan," among advanced students, I frequently bring in interpretations of two or three professional critics--John Livingston Lowes, Elisabeth Schneider and G. Wilson Knight, for instance, are three old stand-bys with very different views. I also bring in, at this

point, Coleridge's own statements about the poem--interrupted opium dream and all--as well as passages from Biographia Literaria on the commanding genius and on the imagination, which may illuminate the reading of the poem. Most often they simply corroborate conclusions that readers have already drawn for themselves.

My point is that written interpretations of poetry may serve in much the same way that model essays serve in a writing program. One may use the interpretations of peers, of the teacher, and of professional critics, but I have listed them in the order of their importance to the poetry lesson and in the order in which they should ordinarily be introduced in the lesson, with the teacher's interpretation coming late or not at all and the professional critic's even later and less frequently.

6. LET POEMS SPEAK TO EACH OTHER. We probably learn to read poems from other poems; therefore, the best handbook on reading poetry is an anthology of poems. For practical purposes in the classroom, the grouping of poems that may illuminate one another is a pleasant and profitable practice. A demonstration class that I have used with eighth graders many times begins with the World Book encyclopedia article on Ulysses S. Grant, then proceeds to a poem entitled "Achilles Deatheridge" by Edgar Lee Masters, which is a fairly straight-forward poem about an encounter between a fictional Achilles from Athens, Illinois, and the famous general. Next, we read "U. S. Grant," a free verse character sketch by Paul Southworth Bliss, a poem that contrasts vividly with the first one in its form, its content, and its details, but has a similar theme: the eccentricity and unorthodox heroism of the general. I conclude the lesson with "Disillusionment at Ten O' Clock," by Wallace Stevens, a much more oblique poem that on the surface has little to do with Ulysses Grant or the two previous poems. But the search for a connection reveals that Grant, as presented in the earlier poems, is probably an example of the kind of person Stevens admires in his poem: like the old sailor who "catches tigers/in red weather," i.e., the nonconformist who may be considered an outsider by society but who has not squelched the ability to dream, the faculty of imagination. Students quickly supply other examples, and the "summoning" of the Stevens poem becomes much more direct and more fun than it could have been in isolation.

Groups (or pairs) of poems on similar topics, on similar themes, by the same author, in contrasting forms, written in different periods of history, of different levels of complexity, expressing different views of the same subject--the possibilities are limitless--may be used to make each poem in the group more accessible and more enjoyable to the students.

John Livingston Lowes, in The Road to Xanadu, provided a lengthy study of the process involved in Coleridge's composition of "Kubla Khan" and other poems. His conclusions have been challenged, debated, and modified or rejected. What seems clear is that there were several roads to Xanadu, or several branches of the road, or maybe several laps in the journey. What was true of the writing of this poem--or any other poem--is probably also true of the reading. There are many roads to Xanadu, or many branches of the same road, or at least many laps in the journey.

I believe, with Northrop Frye, that poetry should stand at the beginning and at the center of the reading curriculum, not at the end or on the fringes. And I believe, with many reading theorists, that the "act" of reading should be the focus of the poetry lesson, not the text, not the author, not the teacher's inspired interpretation, nor even the student as student. And I believe--as stubborn and paradoxical as this may sound--that the text (the words in their order) has a life of its own, call it life "potential" or "epiphenomenal" or "embryonic" or whatever. And, until the cartographers draw new and clearer road maps, I will plan my journey accordingly.

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ABC's of Reading and Writing Poetry in Junior High

Barbara Arnold

Anyone can share poetry. It is a form of literature that can only be shared; it cannot be taught.

Be a reader of poetry yourself--read widely.

Collect as many poetry books as you can get your hands on. Load your shelves, work tables, and student desks with poetry books. Libraries are usually willing to check out books on a long-term basis. Go to garage sales and book fairs, and ask people to donate books.

Don't beat a good poem to death. Read it, share ideas about it, and leave it.

Expect exciting things when you work with poetry. Students feel very good about reading and writing poetry with a little encouragement from you.

Forget about teaching technicalities (hyperbole, metaphor, alliteration, etc.) in isolation. Bring them in casually as the occasion arises. I hand out a list of poetic terms with definitions, and I refer to them occasionally, but I would sooner walk barefoot through rattlesnakes than to have students laboriously find examples of each.

Give students suggestions for writing and revising their poems, but never give commands.

Help students to rise above clichés and trite expressions. Discourage rhymed poetry.

Iambic pentameter and terms of such ilk can put a wet blanket on poetry for many students.

Just giving credit for writing a poem is better than trying to give a grade. (How on earth can you grade a poem?)

Know that your students will show you many poems that "my mother/neighbor/friend wrote." They will not all be literary masterpieces.

Lead students to say what they mean as economically as possible. Tell them to write as though they are paying $1.00 for every word they use.

'Most any kind of poetry will work--narrative poems, free verse, ballads, children's poems, archy poems, epitaphs, limericks, haiku, concrete poems. But you must be enthusiastic about whatever you use.

Never assign poetry to be read silently. Tell students that just as most people cannot look at a sheet of music and "hear" the melody, most of us cannot read a poem silently and really "hear" what it is saying.

Onomatopoeia may be one of the neatest words in the English language!

Praise good work, but don't allow students to expect praise for drivel. Accept and respect what they write, and then lead them to improve the quality of self-expression as they experiment.

Quintessential form of literature--that's poetry!

Relax. You will not make poets out of all students. Work for acceptance of poetry as a marvelous way people can share things with each other.

Supply students with a copy of each poem that the class reads together. If you can't get multiple copies of poetry books, use dittos. If that isn't possible, put the poem on the board or use an overhead.

Try for a balance of exposure to many published poems while allowing students to say something poetically on their own.

Understand, and help your students to understand, that there may be several (but not an infinite number of) valid interpretations of a poem.

Very early, ask them to begin telling you things that have never been said before. Show them that poets often look at familiar things in a different way.

Write with your students. If you assign a poem, write one too. Your struggles, successes, and failures will not diminish you in their eyes.

Xenophobia of poetry is widespread. It is one of the most easily cured phobias.

You should not be surprised if kids (even grown kids) fight over Shel Silverstein's books, Where the Sidewalk Ends and The Light in the Attic.

Zealots very seldom convince students that poetry is worth their time.

Invitations

Elizabeth D. Nelms

Sometimes in our dilemma about how to teach poetry, we forget that poetry speaks. In our careful and often too methodical way of making sure we've "covered" all the units for the year, we forget to give poetry a chance on its own. We seem almost afraid to trust ourselves and our students to the waves that might be created. 'Tis so much safer to rope off the boundaries, making sure that no one steps in waters too deep. In our caution we lose the thrill of the plunge.

In what has been gently described as a class of "reluctant" students, we have taken the plunge. The challenge presented itself in the form of one tall, lanky, quiet student-of-the-week who shared with the class his covert interest in poetry. He did so with some reservation, but he had tested the waters and knew they were safe. He had written of himself:

> Poetry is my power source. Poems give me the wisdom to deal with life's ups and downs. It's funny when I think about other boys my age and how they think about poetry. If I tell some of them how I feel about poetry, they treat me like an outsider and I'm looking into their world all alone, no one my age to talk to about my feelings.

The day he was introduced, he brought a poetry anthology which had been given to him by an uncle several years ago. He told the class that several of the poems had become special to him and he would like to share a few each day. The following selected excerpts were taken from the freewritings of his classmates who accepted his invitation to jump in and enjoy a dip into poetry. Rudyard Kipling's "If--" was one of the poems which had seen this young man through a rough period in his life. Each student was asked to write about any portion of the poem which seemed to speak to him or her. Their responses answered this student's need and at last he had someone his age to talk to about his feeling.

> Don,
>
> I don't know what you expect to hear from everyone, but I've tried to let you know how I feel about this first part in the poem. I was surprised to hear that you like poetry because you don't find many kids or young men, which ever you prefer, interested in poetry; it's very rare.
>
> I used to like to read poetry when I was younger, but I was so young I could only understand some parts of a poem.

Now I am much older and I can understand more poems. You've given me a start into poetry again. I don't know how long it will last, but just look at it this way: you've done me a favor.

Your Friend

"If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you. . ."

I can relate because around my house when one person gets on your case, everyone follows. So when everyone starts talking about me, I just start saying good things about them and finally they start saying nice things about me, and everyone is happy again. My mother says she likes it when I can turn the other cheek and ignore people.

"If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too. . ."

The one time this happened to me was when some money got ripped from my family. They thought I had taken it, but I knew I hadn't and told them about it. They just said, "Sure!!" I tried and tried to find out what had happened to it. . . . After it was all done, they apologized and said they were sorry. I hung on and held to the truth all through it.

"If you can wait and not be tired by waiting. . ."

I've been waiting a long time to get out of school and some days 6:30 comes too early. Then the long hours of studying seem like days, but I can't get tired of it or hate it, or it seems longer.

"If you can dream--and not make dreams your master. . ."

Like Bubba Smith, an ex-football player for the Baltimore Colts and Oakland Raiders. He was an All-American defensive tackle in college and his dream controlled his life. He was so wrapped up in his dream to become a pro football player and a first-round draft choice that he worked hard and didn't seem to care about anything else. Then, in his sixth season, he was injured and never played football again. It was then that he finally realized that playing sports wasn't everything.

"If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same. . ."

I had to meet with disaster when my grandpa was sick. The doctor told him he had lung cancer. The cancer had already spread too far and there was no way of stopping it. I thought, No! He can't have lung cancer. He's only 67! . . .He was such a strong man.

"If you can force your heat and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the <u>will</u> which says to them: Hold on. . ."

After you get in trouble, so many times you have nothing left in life to hold on to, but you still try to hold on. In your mind you are saying, "Hold on! You can do it!" That's like in swimming. I can't swim, but I got out in ten foot water and started swimming with no help. My mind was saying, "You can do it! HOLD ON!" And I did.

"Hold on" is like you're in a football game and the other team is winning by six points and you need a touchdown to win. You get the touchdown, but you're still tied; you need the extra point to win. You're the kicker and you walk onto the field, sweating, trembling. You kick the ball; you're so sure you're going to miss, but you make it! You win the game for the championship. That's what holding on is all about--surviving!

"If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings--nor lose the common touch. . ."

This reminds me of my dad in that when I was little we did not have much money. Now we have more money with my dad's new business, and he is still the same as ever. He still wears levis, flannel shirts, and hunts and fishes, and doesn't care what anyone thinks about him. He's his own person. He hasn't lost the common touch.

"Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
And--which is more--you'll be a man, my son!"

This poem is a thing of men and women, about not being tied down but letting yourself be free. Don't let yourself get unhappy or down, but let your spirit be free and running. When you learn this, you'll be man enough to face the world with pride and dignity.

Don,

This is such a truthful poem. I'm so glad that it was shared with us. I can relate something to just about every line, but it would take me all day to write it all. This <u>is</u> a <u>special</u> poem. THANKS!

Your Classmate.

Don had issued the invitation for his classmates to join him in his enjoyment of poetry. Their candid responses show their willing acceptance, and thus began our joyous splashing around in the pool of poetry. A catch-phrase in the teaching world today is "invite" students to learn, issue "invitations" for learning. It might be wise for us to listen for invitations

being issued to us, the teachers. In our effort to get on the bandwagon of issuing invitations, our ears may be dulled to the real invitations, those whispered by the quiet student who feels like an outsider in this world of learning. We need to see what students will choose. As a teacher, I might not have chosen Kipling's "If--" because of my own wish to bring other poems to broaden the students' experience with poetry. We need to honor the power that comes with a sincere sharing of one student to another, the kind of sharing that is free of chalk dust or the teacher's scent.

One of my favorite approaches in sharing poetry is to have each student respond freely in nonstop focused writings in order to play around with individual responses before pooling ideas orally. Once written, these writings are all "correct" in the sense that each one is an honest attempt by each student to bring meaning to the poem through his or her own experience.

One day before reading Langston Hughes' "Dream Deferred," we talked about the meaning of "deferred" and rambled on a bit on dreams that we all have for the future. I asked them if they had ever had a dream deferred, put off, not to be had until some later date. After we had time to share responses, I read Hughes' poem and asked the students to listen for all the ways he describes a dream deferred. After the second reading, I asked the students to respond in writing to any three of the images which spoke most clearly to them. From these writings I compiled an excerpt sheet, of which a sampling follows. What better way, I wondered, to guide them to look to each other for help and not just wait for a teacher's canned explanation. "What happens to a dream deferred?"

"Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

> Drying up like a raisin in the sun is saying that the dream slowly dies, not right away, but eventually.
>
> The dream has slowly withered away. Maybe the dream has gotten smaller each time a hope was torn down by logic.
>
> The dream has gotten old because it has been wished for so long.

"Does it stink like rotten meat?"

> This dream has gone bad. It was good, and then it turned bad. Now it's awful, useless, and gets in the way.
>
> Just like meat that has sat out in the trash on hot summer days, the crushed dream is humiliating because everyone knows about it and its stink grows worse with every warm day it sits.
>
> Dashed hopes cause bitterness which stinks in the mind like rotten meat does in the physical world. The dream is an unpleasant memory; the dreamer feels pain, embarrassment, or foolishness as he thinks back on it.

"Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet."

> The dream is still there, but it is unreachable.

"Maybe it just sags like a heavy load."

> When the dream does not come true, the dreamer is let down; it's hard to keep on living with this disappointment.
>
> The dream is probably ever-present and still a burden on the person who has tried to drop it. They know that it's best to forget it, but it's always there, making them sag under its weight, almost tempting them to re-clutch it and dream once again.

After responding to the poet's use of images, we tried our own--a marvelous game of metaphor-making, the making of meaning.

> My dream is like a shattered mirror; it is still useful, but it cannot be the same as it once was.
>
> My dream is waiting to come out like a wine being aged; it is something that is never as good at the moment as it will be in the future.
>
> My dream is like climbing a mountain and slipping, falling down, but not all the way to death; the rope catches, and I have to reorganize and climb back up.
>
> My dream was like a toppled tower of toy blocks; but I am rebuilding the tower to its former status; it's all a game with the mind.
>
> My dream is like a kangaroo. I leap forward to try to make my dream come true, but it seems that every time I try to hop, I land and start all over again.
>
> My dream is a dead leaf f$_{a_{l_{l_{l_{l_{ing}}}}}}$ s l o w l y to the ground.

One student wrote simply, "I don't dream, for if a dream does not come true, I will hurt and I don't want to be hurt." That plaintive response compelled me to share the following:

> My mother dreamed of travelling--when the children were all grown. . .when the college educations were paid for . . .when not so many needed her to be right there. But she died at the young age of fifty-six. During those last weeks she shared this insight with her children: "I had so many dreams of things I would like to do. I wanted to travel, to see some of the many places that had come alive for me in my reading. But I'm not sorry I had those dreams, even though I know now I will never get to do those things. I had my dreams and that was lovely in itself."

And thus we shared, finding beauty and power in words and in each other.

Falls the shadow

Banner poet of my youth
Your hollow men evolved plastic replicas
amplifying new insight at 120 decibels
earphones filled with straw

Your shadow now falls between
McKuen and Shakespeare, Monday Night Football
and homework, crib notes and passing, rough
draft and final paper, being liked and
being

Even those who would teach with direct eyes
no longer know of that other kingdom
but ease the shadow between language and act
product and process, underachiever and
under-achiever? Pedants all.

So this is the way of the world.

Sylvia Sarrett

Teaching Poetry to College Freshmen: A Systematic Approach

Barbara J. Hunt

Northrop Frye has said it for us all: It is impossible to "teach poetry," for "literature is not a subject of study, but an object of study" (Frye 11). The subject of study is, in fact, criticism, which is all that can directly be taught. Symbolism, figurative language, rhyme, meter, stanzaic form, connotation, literary movements and influences, allusions, and so on--these are the critical vantage points from which teachers approach literature. Thus, one learns about literature intransitively, for "at no point is there any direct learning of literature itself"(Frye 11).

Perhaps the situation of other English teachers is different from my own, but most of my freshmen do not know how to read a poem. Moreover, most have already decided that they hate poetry. Usually, people dislike that which they do not understand. To appreciate chordal progressions in music, for example, one must first understand scales, key changes, and harmony. To appreciate poetry fully, one must first be aware of certain structural elements; that is, one must learn to be a critic.

The teacher's task, then, is to direct the students' angle of vision in such a way that they are able to put the picture of meaning together for themselves. Through literary criticism, the teacher provides the ways of seeing, not the vision itself.

During my twelve years of teaching, I have developed a series of "steps" for approaching poetry. These steps move from the familiar and (seemingly) obvious to the unfamiliar and subtle. One thing for sure--almost none of my students dislike poetry at the end of the term, for they have learned how to read a poem and that ability allows them to understand and appreciate literature.

(1) The first step of awareness is that most poetry, especially poetry before this century, consists of sentences.

Sir Walter Raleigh's poem "Even Such Is Time" consists of two sentences:

> Even such is time that takes in trust
> Our youth, our joys, our all we have
> And pays us but with earth and dust;
> Who, in the dark and silent grave,
> When we have wandered all our ways,
> Shuts up the story of our days.
> But from this earth, this grave, this dust,
> My God shall raise me up, I trust.

In "seeing" the sentences within a poem, students are less intimidated, for poetry then appears more familiar to them.

(2) In seeing the poem as consisting of sentences, moreover, they become aware of the poem's syntax.

In Raleigh's poem, for example, takes, pays and shuts are the actions of time and the relative pronoun Who stands for time. The semicolon reinforces the separateness of time's actions in the first three lines and in the next three lines. In fact, time takes before we die and pays with death; then it shuts up our story (as if we never existed) after we are dead. The syntax and punctuation are integral to understanding this poem, and students must be taught to see them and to understand their significance.

(3) Syntax and punctuation also play a part in the next step of students' awareness: that poetry frequently illustrates a progression in thought.

Students are often tremendously enlightened to discover that most poetry consists of two (or three) "parts": a problem, a solution; examples, a summary; one view, an opposing view; a story, the outcome; etc. To see this structure is to see another perspective on the meaning. Raleigh's poem, for example, contains one sentence about earthly trust (in time) and one sentence about heavenly trust (in God). The poem moves from time to timelessness, from the physical world to the spiritual world, from mortality to immortality, from a deceptive trust to a well-placed trust. The length of the sentences can also be relevant to the meaning. Raleigh devotes six lines to earthly trust but only two lines to spiritual trust as if to say earthly trust is complicated but spiritual trust is simple, like a child's.

(4) Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent" illustrates well the next angle of awareness--word choice, including figures of speech:

> She is as in a field a silken tent
> At midday when a sunny summer breeze
> Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent. . . .

Silken adds very precise qualities to the described woman: femininity, softness, gracefulness, luxuriousness, strength, beauty. Omit the word, and the resulting "She is as in a field a. . .tent" makes her sound coarse, fat, undesirable. "She is as. . .a silken tent" reveals the underlying simile of the poem. Omit as, and the resulting "She is. . .a silken tent" pulls the weight of meaning away from her and toward the tent. To see the weight that even one word can bear is to appreciate the importance of word choice to overall meaning.

In Raleigh's poem, a shift in word choice occurs between the first and second sentences. The first six lines emphasize the general, the we; what time does, time does to all. The last two lines shift to first person, for Raleigh can speak only of his own faith and future, not of others'.

(5) The next step of awareness for students is symbolism, a subject most of them are familiar with, though not always comfortably so. What they

do not understand is why the author "doesn't just come right out and say it." The emphasis on say it reflects an attitude that considers ideas as objects, something external, something well defined.

The act of discovery, in poetry as well as in life, is the difference between wissen and kennen, between savoir and connaître. Great literature "expresses" the ineffable. In "The Silken Tent," midday and summer reveal the woman's age, but to say directly that she is middle-aged deflates, even negates, the silken aspects of her personality. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 ("That time of year"), we are shown a series of metaphors (season of year, time of day, glow of fire) that diminish in length of time encompassed until the moment of death is at hand. Readers are taken experientially into the psyche of the narrator. Through poetry, we become the singer of the song, not just the listener of a distant cry.

Archetypal symbols are especially eye-opening to students, who respond to an awareness of them as if they were given Captain Whizbag's Decoder Ring. They often start off giving examples from popular songs that use sexual, age, and light/dark symbols. Suddenly, meaning seems to blossom before their eyes.

(6) As students become aware of rhyme and meter, they ask why a poet bothers with these devices. Frost's comment that, for him, writing poetry without rhyme or meter would be like playing tennis without a net is helpful to a teacher trying to explain this point.

After explaining the terminology of scansion and talking about human response to rhythm, I explain the less obvious use of metrics--to draw attention to key words.

She is as in a field a silken tent

At midday when a sunny summer breeze. . . .

When Frost breaks the regular metrical pattern of iambs, he draws our attention to as and midday. Likewise, deviation from the norm in "Even Such Is Time,"

And pays us, but with earth and dust,

Who, in the dark and silent grave,

When we have wandered all our ways,

Shuts up the story of our days.

causes us to notice pays us, who, and shuts up. By emphasizing these words, Raleigh is able to accomplish two things: (1) carry the subject (who) over to the verb (shuts up) despite their being separated by a prepositional phrase and a clause, and (2) emphasize the underlying banking metaphor (takes, pays, shuts up) of the first six lines. Thus, by deviating from the established pattern, the author helps readers "feel" those words that are pivotal to the poem's meaning. The sound devices of poetry can be similarly explained as helpful, as well as aesthetic.

By teaching literary criticism, by teaching the elements of a poem which can be isolated, the teacher helps students see structure, and once they understand structure, they begin to discover, for themselves, the ineffable qualities of literature. Finally, of course, the structure is the meaning, for "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Yeats 214)

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A Stair at a Time

Donna M. Grout

By the time I started high school, I was a poetry addict. My supply source was a cavernous, untidy, and busy bookstore. A stairway in it housed the poetry collection. This stairway was the only passage between the two large floors; books started at the bottom and went upward in piles which decreased in height and expanded in depth until they completely filled the ledge around the top half of the stairwell. Each poetry buff nested on the stair of his choice while the other customers trod up and down. Hundreds of volumes hovered around offering both endless poetic experiences and a real possibility of death by avalanche.

The owner of this literary emporium, however, knew physics. His merchandise quivered but never fell. He also had a grip on reality: poetry buffs would put up with inconvenience and had no apparent satiation level. The majority of his readers didn't come for poetry, however. It was wise, then, to make their preferences most accessible. Ergo: poetry was in the dimmest and most awkward place. It was also in the place devoid of clerks to assist and watch. No shoplifters or well-heeled buyers there, the owner must have reasoned, just some ladies of Shallot and a few scholar gypsies--eccentric but harmless creatures dwelling in an enchanted stairway.

Several years into my teaching career I began to figure out the full significance of that stairway. What was a haven of delight and intellectual stimulation for me was a second-class inventory area for the owner and just a necessary passageway for most customers. Some would creep around the "nesters" hoping to avoid an accident. Others might complain some about the general conditions but would tread through tolerantly. A few were quite exasperated by the poetry readers who aggravated a bad situation by being stationary in the travel path. Indeed, as an adolescent, I was what I became in part as an English teacher--an anomaly to be skirted around, tolerated, or quietly cursed as I stood in the traffic pattern of life insisting on reading poetry.

As an English teacher, of course, I have had to come to the realization that the majority of students were not and would not become "nesters." That has been painful but, like the bookstore owner, I now do have a grip on reality. Unlike him, though, I work to make poetry fully accessible to all. Each year I get a bit better, for example, at luring students in my Introduction to Literature course towards the stairway. Usually I manage to help the majority start to regard poetry as a meaningful medium of expression which they can read with effort on their part and mine. This process might be described as getting to the enchantment a stair at a time.

My approach calls for some special starting tactics and a high amount of staying power for me and my students, but it is workable. Recognition of the uniqueness of poetry is primary. The Greeks, for instance, associated poetry and its creators with the gods, and actually so has just about everybody else in one way or another. Statements about poetry tend to be paeans to it rather than just critical analyses of the art form. Given this situation, it is understandable that the layman may view poetry tenuously: it is not only very special, but some of its uniqueness is connected to difficulty. If poets can really express "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," such expressions are more than extremely difficult to create--they are a challenge to read and assimilate.

The news that poetry is special and difficult has filtered down to students from the gods, amongst others. Also all of the positive and negative things that happen when something (or someone) is raised above the purely natural plane have happened to poetry. Whether a student thinks poetry can shore up the cracks in his childhood theology or is something to be avoided by football players is not as important as giving him time and help to sort out what possible relationships could exist between himself and poetry. This is hard to do in a general course, but the process can be sped up some and a foundation of possibility built if students get an opportunity to voice and examine whatever feelings and ideas they have or think they have about poetry.

Therefore, I provide students with questions such as these: What, if anything, pleases you about poetry or attracts you to it? What, if any, positive experiences have you had with poetry in or out of school? What, if anything, do you dislike (or what troubles you) about poetry? What, if any, negative experiences have you had with poetry in or out of school? What is <u>your own</u> definition of poetry? Whatever your views on poetry, all of you will be reading it in this course. Therefore, what do you think you need to learn or need help with in order to be able to read poetry (or read it better)?

Students write on these questions for homework and then discuss their responses in small groups. They get to share, discover agreements and differences, talk about ideas and feelings, and have their individual responses tempered, changed, and challenged. Fringe ideas die naturally during group work. Thus, when the groups report to the class, areas of sincere confusion and clearly negative and positive views can be seriously discussed by all.

While this assignment aids me in finding out what a particular class will need from me, it provides the students with a chance to lessen tension, find out it is safe to say what they really feel, and discover that little support clusters exist for them in class. It also lets them really think about the subject of poetry in an atmosphere that challenges views yet is basically unthreatening.

We proceed from this initial discussion to a major reading challenge. The students read a poem together and I help only in very limited ways: ask questions, provide information that could be found in any dictionary, and refuse to allow guesses to get by as accurate reading. I am indebted

to a colleague for some of this assignment and for calling my attention to the poem I frequently use (although any short, moderately difficult poem that demonstrates significant poetic characteristics will do).

The poem I refer to is Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." It has a few words that usually call for a dictionary, is on an unlikely subject for most students, has similes that make a reader stretch his mind and feelings, provides important opportunities to study how punctuation and sentence structure relate to accurate poetry reading (knowledge of standard English being a major problem for far too many students in regard to reading poetry), and gives a perfect example of a cardinal principle: DO NOT GO BEYOND THE LITERAL LEVEL UNLESS THE POEM ABSOLUTELY DEMANDS IT.

Students must read this poem a couple of lines at a time without looking at the rest of the poem. They must tell me and each other what things they are sure of and what they are not. They must make sense out of each bit before passing on to the next part. This reading takes up an entire period. If I do my job well, I am relentless about being sure they know what each line (or punctuation block) means and how we get from one ounce of meaning to another. I must make them tell me rather than succumb to telling them. In this way, they not only <u>read</u> the poem; they realize <u>they</u> are who <u>read</u> it.

The next assignment is a practice sheet of four poems ("Grass" by Sandburg, "In a Station of the Metro" by Pound, "i thank you God for most this amazing" by cummings, and "Couplet" by Frost). Any reasonable group of poems would do and I have used quite a variety. However, these seem to work especially well because they are very short and offer an amazing range of things to learn about poetry and the reading of it (use of and effects of historical allusions, repetitions, and figures of speech; special effects of punctuation and syntax; the sometimes vital importance of titles; why poets break rhythm or line length, etc.). The assignment is to read the four poems and be prepared for a factual reading quiz.

Regardless of the success most students have had with Keats's sonnet, renewed nervousness sets in. If it took all of them 50 minutes with my coaching to read fourteen lines, how will they each read four poems in a couple of days? I point out that two of the four poems are only two lines long and assure them that we will be doing a lot of work on these poems in class. That explanation helps, but just as important is the fact that a piece of vital truth has been discovered or confirmed--a short poem may take as long or longer to read than a short story!

The reading quiz is open-book; I want students to concentrate on the lines and the questions together. Once we begin correcting the quizzes, every answer anybody argues for must be validated by the text of the poem. Fewer than half the class do as well on this quiz as they did on their last quiz over the short story unit. Despite what has been achieved in poetry reading, then, much is left to be done and I tell them that. If they had to learn to read short stories to get high marks on quizzes, they have to do the same with poetry. The process is the same; it is just that the art form may be more difficult or less appealing to some of the students.

As I promised, we commence intense study of the four poems. Students are given study questions to work on in groups. The questions are designed to promote careful reading and help students arrive at a grasp of content, feeling, and structure. Some sample questions from the series in the assignment are:

On "i thank you God for most this amazing"

> What uses do parentheses and dashes have in standard English? Why are parentheses used in stanzas 2 and 4? Having trouble? Read the poem without those two stanzas. What do you discover? Why are dashes used in stanza 3? Read it without what is "dashed off." See how much more of that stanza you can omit and still get sense. Why do you suppose all of it is there?

On "Grass"

> Identify the proper names used. What connections are there between and among them?
> What is repeated in the poem? What effect does that repetition have?

On "In a Station of the Metro"

> To decide the meaning of Pound's poem, it would help to know what figure of speech the poem forms. Don't forget the colon. What do colons do in English? Still having trouble? Draw what you think the poem says. That should help.

I assist the groups as they work, but I always try to ask questions that will lead them to the answer they are seeking rather than give them an answer. Once each group has worked through the set of questions assigned to it, the findings and remaining problems are shared with the entire class so that all can learn and help. An assignment like this is likely to take up three class periods. My aim is not to cover a bunch of poems; it is to help students learn how to read poetry.

There are some risks to this approach, of course. A few students have all their fears and dislikes confirmed. Not only do I stand in life's traffic pattern, I refuse to provide a code book which will decipher all the "hidden meanings" they believe poetry is constructed of. Rarely do I succeed with these students. Yet I must admit I probably do not succeed very well with them regarding short stories either. It isn't just poetry that is the problem. Furthermore, some of the students who have voiced favorable feelings about poetry are apt to panic for a while. Suddenly they do not read poetry as well as they used to in their view. Reassurance is needed here. A stairway, after all, is more difficult to travel than flat terrain. Poetry demands climbing, but it also gives various levels of interlocking delight. These students have to move from being "browsers" to being "nesters." A new but more exciting demand is now placed on them, and most of them realize it.

Most of the members of the class (those between "Oh, no, not poetry!"

and "At last, poetry!") struggle along. They get frustrated, but less often the more practice they get. They also become very pleased with themselves when they read well. They will probably never become nesters, but they move away from being merely nervous or glaring treaders. It becomes increasingly difficult for most of them to think of the stairway as just a crowded and hazardous passageway to somewhere else.

As our study of poetry progresses in the same demanding vein, those who leaned towards poetry at the start clarify why and enjoy it more; those who do their shopping outside of the stairway begin to understand and respect why a few of their peers "nest." These results do not compare with the teenage passion that once would send me hurtling across streets in a manner deemed inappropriate for the school uniform I wore. Such conduct meant that I risked being reported to the school if I survived the traffic I challenged to have a few minutes in the bookstore stairway between buses. No, what happens in my classroom is not that, but it will do. Even an English teacher can sometimes "find the mortal world enough."

Coaxing a Wild Surmise

Linda Wyman

Our students want poetry. I am sure of it. They aren't all sure of it, but I am sure of it. I am daily confronted, for instance, with the fact that our students like words. I have only to listen to them take up with a word, and stroke it, and carry it with them at all times (at least for a few weeks) and insist on it during that time to know that, at the least, we can say that words do have a fascination for them.

And they are fascinated by metaphor. When I asked a group of students to tell me recently some words that they liked for the sake of the words themselves--some song lyrics, or poems, or speeches, or whatever, one of them said that she enjoyed two songs that alluded to the hymn "Amazing Grace." One of the songs told the story, she said, of a girl whose moral life had slacked off a bit. It went, "'Amazing Grace' used to be her favorite song./ Lord help me, Jesus, where has my good girl gone?" The other song, which made a more subtle play on words, was called "Ain't it amazing, Gracie." When a student tells me that she likes that song because of its language, she is telling me that she has a lively, if not an elegant, appreciation for metaphor.

These remarks, then, are for our students who like words and are excited by metaphor, who need poetry, and who will therefore be glad if we teach them to read it. We needn't be afraid, I think, to teach them the best things we know--both the best poems and the best ways of reading them; we must not let anyone bully us into behaving as if it really were all right to dispense with the printed word and just watch films, however sophisticatedly we may come to watch them. And, however tired and overworked we are, we must not allow ourselves the ease of substituting our experience of the poem for our students' learning to experience the poem for themselves.

I spoke just now of the need to teach our students the best poems we know and the best ways of reading them. I think it is important to let students know that the very first poem I am teaching them is both a "good" poem and a "hard" one. To put that another way, I think it important, when we have read our very first poem together, for my students to know that they have accomplished something difficult. For that reason, I never start a poetry unit (or poetry class, or whatever) with a soft, easy poem. I often start with Keats's sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," and I would like to explain why.

The poem gives me an opportunity to point out, in one hour's time (if I don't dally), several of the things that one simply must do in order to read poetry. As we read the poem, I stress that I am telling them nothing--and I make every effort to hold to that. My purpose is to dispel the notion

that only magically gifted persons, usually quiet blonde girls, can read poetry. Even if "Chapman's Homer" is in whatever textbook we have, I usually copy it on a single sheet of paper; I don't want my students to be distracted by anything else that may be on the page. I ask them to fold the bottom of the paper up so that only the title is showing, and then we begin: I ask questions which lead toward a reading of the poem.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
  And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
  Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
  That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
  Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
  When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
  He stared at the Pacific--and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise
  Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

What do we expect a title to tell us?
What does this title tell us that this poem is about?
What do we have to know in order to answer this question?
(What's a Homer? Who's Chapman?)
What does it mean to say that the poem is on "first looking into. . ."?
What experience, then, is the poem about?
Who is the poem about?

What can we know for a fact when we have read the first two lines of the poem? (That is, how much would you be willing to take to court?)
Does the speaker give an indication as to how he feels about the traveling he's done? Which words suggest how he feels? How would we have felt if he had said, for instance, "realms of tinfoil"?

Where does the first sentence end (i.e., where is the first period)?
What does this fact suggest, then, about the relationship between the first two lines and the second two lines?
What words suggest that lines 1-2 and 3-4 are about the same thing? (If I have any trouble getting an answer to this question, I try, What are the subject and verb of the clause in lines 1-2? in lines 3-4? What word in line 3 refers to roughly the same thing as realms, states, and kingdoms?)

What questions do we need to ask in order to be able to read lines 3-4? (What does bards mean? fealty? If the dictionary tells us that Apollo is both the sun god and the god of poetry, which meaning shall we choose? What words that have already appeared in the poem make us know that we've made the right choice?)

Now: what do lines 3-4 tell us?
Why, if there are islands that poets are in charge of, have we not heard of them? If our own good sense tells us that there are no islands (and little else) that poets are in charge of, then we must ask, What *are* poets in charge of? That is, what territories *do* they hold "in fealty to Apollo"?

(What will inevitably take place at this point will be as thrilling a moment as one can experience in the teaching of poetry.)

What words in lines 5-6 repeat or echo words in lines 1-4?
How has the speaker's experience with Homer differed from his experience in lines 1-4? (If I need to, I say, "Look at the verb.")

If it's pure and you breathe it, what word does your mind supply after *serene*?

What event caused the speaker actually to "breathe the air"--that is, to *be* there--in Homer's territory?

What do we normally expect a colon to tell us? What, then, should we *expect* lines 9-10 to be about?

Consider what the experience described in lines 9-10 *would* be "like." For instance, what is the difference between a "watcher" of the skies and a glancer-up-at the skies? How many people have ever had the experience of discovering a new planet, do you suppose? (How many planets *are* there, insofar as anyone knows?) --So, how *would* a person feel "when a new planet. . ."?

In line 11, the speaker uses *like* again: what was the experience of Cortez "like"? Consider: where was Cortez (or Balboa) from? When did he live? When he left home, how many oceans did he think there were on earth? Where's Darien? What's the terrain like on the isthmus of Panama? (Hint: American soldiers trained there for jungle warfare in Vietnam.)
What's a *surmise*? What could possibly account for the men's looking at each other with a "wild" one?

Now: what do the two "likes" in the poem have in common? (If the students answer "Great" or "Something nice," I ask "Great *what*?" etc. until they say something about "discoveries.")

What do these two statements about travel and (life-changing) discovery help the speaker to say about his own experience with Chapman's Homer?

What do the discovery statements (the "like" passages, the similes, lines 9-14) have in common with the kind of talk the speaker used in the opening lines?

Does anyone wonder why the speaker didn't just say "what he meant"?

("Lively discussion," as they say, ensues.)

In summary, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is an effective poem to teach because. . .

It encourages--yea, forces--one to make use of common knowledge (Homer), a dictionary (Chapman, bards, fealty), connotation ("realms of gold"), context (Apollo as the god of poetry).

It encourages--forces--one to notice punctuation (the semi-colon at the end of line 2, the colon at the end of line 8), repetition/continuity (realms, states, kingdoms, islands), metaphor/simile, and the necessity to stop and think.

It confronts one with the necessity of making The Great Figurative Leap (and shows how a poem tells one when to make it).

It suggests how poetry is different from history (e.g., "stout Cortez").

It provides one with an occasion for talking about rhyme, meter, sonnet (definition), the relationship between stanzaic form and meaning, allusion, how knowing the poet's biography enriches the reading of his work (Keats, Charles Cowden Clarke, and the composition of "Chapman's Homer"), how the poet's work enriches the reading of his biography (what it means to say, for instance, that "Keats began to discover his own poetic voice").

And so on. "Every end is a beginning."

Some Thoughts on Teaching Poetry

Robert C. Jones

A savage place! As holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted. . . .

The end--I suspect--should be our beginning: we teach a poem so that our students will want to read more poems. So the focus of our activities, probably, should be in the affective domain rather than in the cognitive domain. What I propose to discuss, in the following pages, will be thoughts, techniques, strategies gathered over a number of years and from a number of sources--workshops, texts, classes, students, and colleagues--always from students and colleagues.

ABOUT COGNITIVE SKILLS. I do not mean to suggest that cognitive skills are unimportant. But all of us know that it is easier to quantify matters from the cognitive domain than it is to quantify matters from the affective domain, and much of our testing, examining, evaluating time is spent on matters that can be quantified. Therefore, perhaps without our intending it, we spend much of our class time on matters from the cognitive domain when we teach a poem: we talk about, and define, and give examples of rhyme, and meter, and stanzas, and figures of speech, and enjambment, and caesura, and alliteration, and assonance, and consonance, and repetition--the list may be extended indefinitely.

As I say, I do not mean to suggest that cognitive skills are unimportant. However, I do mean to suggest that class time--much class time--can and should be profitably spent on matters from the affective domain when we teach a poem.

ABOUT AFFECTIVE LEARNING. For most of my students--at whatever level (elementary through senior citizens)--the best entry to the affective domain is the five senses. The first, and best, approach to any poem (I continually remind myself) is to experience it with as many of my senses as I can. The sight and sound of a poem make their impacts upon the reader/listener without any recourse to definitions or examples. Like any work of art (the Parthenon, the Mona Lisa, the Brahms Violin Concerto), the poem I read/hear is a microcosm--a little reality thrown against my senses to be experienced in all the ways I can make sense of reality.

As Mallarme said, "Sonnets are made. . .not with ideas but with words." One of the most important lessons to be taught/learned in the classroom is the connection between the senses and the intellect: the way the eye looks, and the mind sees; the way the ear listens, and the mind hears; the way the skin touches, and the mind feels; the way the mouth and the tongue taste, and the mind savors.

Only words give us the connection between sense and intellect. But rarely do we use classroom time to play around enough with words to learn (or re-learn) how exciting it can be to see, to taste, to hear, to feel, to sense the world through someone else's mind.

PRELIMINARY STRATEGIES. Whether I am teaching how to read a poem, or how to write a poem, I usually begin with words—with nouns, abstract and concrete.

A simple and rewarding activity is to go around the class and collect words--half of them abstract nouns, half of them concrete nouns. Here, partly from memory, partly from myself, is a typical list:

Abstract	Concrete
courage	clothes pin
hate	sidewalk
cowardice	shoe lace
stupidity	vacuum cleaner
fortitude	rose

Such a list leads me to what I call Jones's Famous Headache Theory: Nobody knows how bad my headache is--because it's in my head. The theory applies equally well to abstract nouns: Nobody knows the meaning of my abstract noun courage because it, like my headache, is in my head. But everybody knows what a clothes pin looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like, sounds like, because a clothes pin is a concrete noun: it names an item that we all can experience through the senses.

The dynamism of a poem, I suggest, then, does not come from the abstract idea (courage); rather, the dynamism of a poem comes from the concrete words that connect intellect with sense, that give us the excitement of hearing and feeling and seeing an idea as we have never heard, felt, and seen before: through someone else's mind.

A good exercise is to take each one of the abstract nouns in one's list and to show how each concrete noun--the experiencing of each concrete noun--can make real an abstraction. The coupling of the abstract fortitude with the concrete rose, for instance, may result in something like what follows here:

Fortitude

It grows in darkness--
secret--
nourished by the rain
and the sun.
In the most unexpected places,
it appears:
sends out green leaves,
stretches
toward blue sky.

Tight buds
unfold,
turn blind lids
outward--
and
blossom.

Similarly, hate and sidewalk:

Hate

Sometimes it chokes up,
crumbles,
blocks, and footsteps
stumble.
In most strong instances,
the walkway
stretches
unobstructed
from one end to the other
and
the shadows race
back and forth,
growling
in the sun.

Effective poetry, perhaps, is the process of making real someone's headache (abstraction, idea, feeling, emotion); the student who has had the fun, the excitement, of discovering how a sidewalk can share an equation with hate is probably going to be more open to discovering how "a narrow fellow in the grass" can share an equation with fear.

Another activity for heightening students' word-consciousness is the process known as "imaging." For this process, I frequently ask a student to suggest a topic or idea. Several months ago at a workshop, the topic suggested was Spring in Chillecothe (the location of the workshop). "Imaging" is tapping into the senses and trying to fit concrete words or phrases evocative of the topic to as many of the senses as possible: "Close your eyes, think about spring here in Chillecothe: what vivid images do you see? Write them down--concrete nouns, sense words, adjective phrases. What do you hear? What do you smell? What can you touch? What can you taste?"

Effective poetry is marked by strong, vivid images; the student who has wrestled with the problem of tasting spring is probably going to be more open to understanding and responding to Keats's Autumn, "Drowsed with the fume of poppies." Barbara Vandevender from Spickard, Missouri, was one of the participants in the Chillecothe workshop. Here is what she generated as a result of the "imaging" process:

Spring

Spring is lye-washed
clothes blowing on wires

strung between the two big
maple trees south of our house,
a fluffy pink comforter
and a hand-pieced quilt made
by my grandma. Dad's jeans
and Mom's faded dresses--no color left.
Lots of long underwear, worn
thin and shapeless.
My hands
feel the ridges of the
washboard and the sting
of the strong lye on my cut fingers.
But I feel pleased
when I look
at clean clothes, sun,
and blue sky.

Barbara's lines about spring represent still another activity, or strategy, to employ in the teaching of poetry: persuade, encourage, entice students to attempt their own lines of verse--and join in the process yourself. Never ask your students to do something you haven't tried. Most students like light verse: limericks, "Little Willie" poems, nonsense lines. Reading, and then imitating, such forms opens the door to discussion and presentation of such cognitive skills as stanza designing, rhyming, counting metrical feet, playing with alliteration, learning about onomatopoeia, and so on.

AH! MISS GROBY! REST, REST, PERTURBED SPIRIT. Like James Thurber, most of us probably had our own version of Miss Groby, who led--or dragged--us through wild landscapes of literature. My own particular Miss Groby, I remember, was unfortunately influenced by the "hidden meaning" school of interpretation. I grew up thinking that poets were sneaky writers, afraid to reveal what they really wanted to say, who--perforce--cunningly concealed their meanings in mysterious mazes of meters and rhymes. Many of us, I am afraid, unwittingly perpetuate the "hidden meaning" school in our classrooms still. Often, to my horror, I find myself browbeating a class (all in the interests of good interpretation): "But come on, now! What does this line really mean?"

The student who has spent some time generating lines of his own, I submit, is less prone to fall for that kind of brow-beaten interpretation. Barbara Vandevender was not trying to hide her feelings about spring in Chillecothe; she was doing her best to communicate--through vivid and concrete words--the look, and the touch, and the feel of a particular time of year.

I learned something about my job as a teacher some years ago from a student who had just recently taken up playing the guitar. She told me that she always likes to sit where she can watch a performer's hands when she goes to a guitar performance: she wants to find out how somebody else solves the same problems she has with the fingering. The student who has faced, and tried to solve, a problem in lines she has generated will be doubly interested in seeing how someone else has faced, and solved, that same problem. No poem is obscure, or difficult, for a student who wants to learn something from that poem. Like my guitar-playing student, we always want to watch the fingers of the professionals.

A CREDO OF SORTS. By virtue of their training, teachers know, and have access to, enormous amounts of information. The temptation is to overwhelm our students—to bombard them with facts. But part of our training (indeed, that part which probably keeps us in the profession) encompasses the facts of the heart: the <u>love</u> of reading, the <u>love</u> of writing, the <u>love</u> of finding and holding and following an image, a pattern, a mystery, a clue, to the heart's ease of fullness, completeness, and knowing. When he wrote "Kubla Khan," Samuel Taylor Coleridge never suspected he would be quoted approvingly as a model for affective learning and teaching:

> . . . With music loud and long
> I would build that dome in air,
> That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
> And all who heard should see them there,
> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Boredom, Beowulf, and Other Important Battles in Teaching Poetry

Amy Lala Luebbert

The first year I advanced from the ranks of teachers of the time-passers to teachers of the college-bound taking English Literature, I was excited. Finally I would be teaching serious students literature of value, exploring the greatest works of literature with articulate students who could both read and write. I realized that my "gifted" students were not so perceptive as I had imagined when I asked for students' comments after reading Beowulf, and the most vocal responder/contributor in the class told me that Beowulf was boring because there was no action in it. This comment came from a student to whom I had taught Great Books the previous semester, and I was certain he could read, perceive, analyze, and comment on prose fiction. What I determined was that my students could not read poetry and did not believe anybody but English teachers could read poetry, and that their previous exposure to poetry had primarily been a study of literary periods, with students taking notes and memorizing lines and works and identifying stylistic and literary devices. I also believed that students' problems in and attitudes about reading poetry stemmed from some very simple but correctible verities: that they didn't know they could read poetry as well as any other literary genre if they would take the time to, that they didn't know that the skills required in reading poetry were the same skills required in reading anything but that more care and precision were required, and that they had developed the belief that they could not read poetry because for years they had gotten away with letting their eyes roam across the page and then looking up for the teacher to tell them what the poem said. I refused to let them get away with believing that Beowulf had no action in it, that they could not read poetry, or that I would entertain any notion of telling them what poems said any more willingly than I would have recited to them what novels said. I intended to get them involved in the literature, reading it so closely that they would learn, if they learned nothing else, that poems were readable and readable by them.

I began laboriously questioning. I discovered that students attempting to read poetry ignore vital things--pronoun antecedents, word meanings, punctuation--things they don't have to struggle with in reading other forms of literature. In poetry the meaning is so concentrated that such vital clues as these cannot be ignored. I also noticed that grammar has its practical application not in teaching writing but in providing meaning to reading. A student who reads a sentence without recognizing (at least in essence) the subject and verb of that sentence does not comprehend that sentence's meaning. In poetry, with its inverted syntax and complex sentence structures, meaning is lost if students fail to perceive subjects and verbs. Thus I began my questioning, fully intending to direct students' attention to the

problems encountered in reading poetry, and fully believing we would all arrive at meaning together by actually reading the poetry. For hours I droned: "Who speaks in this poem?" Who is addressed?" "What is the subject of the first sentence?" "What are the verbs?" "What tense is the poet speaking in?" "What is the antecedent of 'this' in line 3?" Slowly and painfully answers arrived: "'This' stands for all the things he just named in the previous line." "He speaks to someone he loves." Thus we began our painful plodding through poems, one reading problem at a time. The main failure of this approach, I discovered, was that only the student being questioned was actively engaging in solving the specific reading problem I asked about; the other 32 students were sneaking glances at watches, gazing anticipatingly at the door, or looking at me waiting for answers. I paced the front of the room waiting for answers, asking for verification of answers, and barking at the rest of the class to look at their books--the answers weren't carved on my face. We progressed, slowly and painfully, and not nearly fast enough for me to believe the semester would ever get us beyond Canterbury Tales.

I decided that more direct involvement was required and that students could read if they were required to. Thus I tackled Elizabethan sonnets with a new plan of action. Students would have to say whatever they knew to say and whatever they could say about the sonnets before we tried to read them together in class. That would require that each student attempt to tackle some of the problems of reading the poetry alone, not waiting for me to ask the pertinent questions and for someone else in the class to answer them. Each student would have to wrestle with the problems of reading each sonnet alone, aided only by a dictionary and meaning implied by words, punctuation, and structure. We battled several sonnets together in class, and I set them to work on their own. There was moaning, gnashing of teeth, complaining of unfairness, but they worked. The next day I collected the papers at the beginning of class, we read the assigned sonnet together, and I set them to work on another one. At the beginning of the next day's class, I returned the sonnet papers to comments such as "What do you mean a paper saying 'Somebody wrote this to a friend' is only worth one point out of 10?" That night students began seeing more and saying more. They began looking up words such as "vain" and "travail." They paid attention to structures such as introductory adverbial clauses (even though they couldn't have identified them by grammatical name). They took responsibility for trying to tackle the poems themselves instead of waiting for their English teacher to translate. Their being responsible for writing something, for trying to say what the poem was about, what the poet was up to in the poem, required that they apply their brainpower to the printed word. Slowly and tediously, they began to read; their papers demonstrated that they had.

I continued assigning sonnets daily for about six days. Each day I collected their papers, read through them as quickly as I possibly could, scribbled brief comments in the margins or at the bottom, assigned proportionate points out of a possible 10, and returned the previous day's papers at the beginning of class. The daily papers from three classes of over 30 English Literature students was intimidating, but I read and wrote quickly, commenting on absolutely nothing in their papers except their perception in reading and, occasionally their substantiation of that reading. Across the board they showed improvement, if not in their ability to read, at least in their ability to show that they were reading.

After a continuous regimen of independent sonnet tackling (followed every day by our reading aloud the sonnets and talking about them after I had picked up their papers), I gave them one more assignment. They were to select from their books a sonnet which we had not read together, one they liked and could read, and teach that sonnet to a small group of their peers. The assignment gave them directions: list all the questions one must answer to arrive at a thorough reading of this sonnet; begin in your groups by reading your sonnets aloud; be prepared to supply meanings of any words you didn't know; ask your questions and wait patiently for answers; ask in a different or more specific way if your questions can't be answered; when everyone is satisfied they "have" the sonnet, read it aloud one more time so they can all really savor it. I collected their questions and their own answers to them. The thoroughness of their asking was worth up to 50 points.

Watching my students work on these sonnets has been annually one of the highlights of my teaching career. I give them about two class days to work on "their" sonnets, and presentations require about two days. During the preparation time, I watch from the secrecy of my desk as students thumb dictionary pages, back up and reread, turn to ask another student for verification of subject and verb, try out questions on each other. Students, I am positive, become more involved with the sonnet they choose to teach than with any other work of literature. I have arrived at volleyball games during this project and had students tell me, "I think I'm going to do Shakespeare's 116, either that or the 'fire and ice' one." I have had students write parodies of their sonnets for me and give them to me at the end of the semester. I overheard one of my students recite from memory his sonnet (a love sonnet) during a dinner before a dance. As I've played volleyball during the senior/faculty game, my literature students have tried to distract me by throwing out sonnet terms and lines of sonnets. I would bet almost across the board that if there is any poem my students remember and know by heart (though it never occurred to me to ask them to memorize it), it is "their" sonnet, the one they thought through, read aloud, poured over, and taught to their groups. (Surely you <u>know</u> anything better for having taught it.)

The final stage of the "teaching students to read by actually making them read sonnets" project is, as any educator knows, evaluating results. I do that (having already warned my students at the beginning of the project) by testing. I give them a dittoed sheet with two Shakespearean sonnets on it when they come into the room. They are to select whichever poem they can better read and to write as much as they can about it. They are free to use dictionaries. Their papers confirm to me what I had believed initially about students' reading of poetry--it certainly can be done. That they can tackle previously unseen Shakespearean sonnets in one class period and write the papers that appear below justifies my hope. Perhaps even more exciting to me than the papers themselves, however, were the events that occurred during the test the first year I tried this project. A most average male student, the most likely candidate you could imagine for a non-reader of poetry, walked up to my desk and asked for confirmation of whether a mark of punctuation was a comma or a period (sometimes uncertain on my typewriter). That it mattered, and that he <u>knew</u> it mattered, was one of the epiphanies of my teaching career. As I looked across the room, all eyes were scrutinizing the actual work of the poet. Within minutes, students who had not brought with them their

recommended dictionaries looked up panic-stricken and pointed to my dictionary shelf. They practically fought for dictionaries. Every student in that room knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was inconceivable to attempt to read a poem without knowing the meaning and the possibilities of every word. I serenely and exultantly roamed the aisles doling dictionaries to the needy.

I am going to quote three students' papers in their entirety, each written on a different sonnet. The first two students, Paul Dowden and Shawn McNulty, wrote "A" papers. Some of what they say is obvious, yet necessary still; I would have been glad if I could have known as much to say about a Shakespearean sonnet when I entered college as these two did very early in their semester of English Literature during their junior year of high school. The difference it surely made to them, would have made to me, testifies to me more clearly than anything else that could have happened. From the Elizabethan period through the Victorian, only one student ever again looked at me when I asked a question about a poem; all other eyes went immediately to the poem itself. The one student whose eyes didn't, grinned and looked sheepishly at his book when I asked what he was looking at me for.

Paul's paper was on Sonnet 17:

> Who will believe my verse in time to come
> If it were fill'd with your most high deserts?
> Though yet, heaven knows, it is but as a tomb
> Which hides your life and shows not half your parts.
> If I could write the beauty of your eyes
> And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
> The age to come would say 'This poet lies';
> Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly faces.
> So should my papers yellowed with their age
> Be scorn'd like old men of less truth than tongue,
> And your true rights be term'd a poet's rage
> And stretched metre of an antique song:
> But were some child of yours alive that time,
> You should live twice; in it and in my rhyme.

In 50 minutes he read his poem for the first time and wrote this paper:

> Sonnet 17 is an Elizabethan sonnet because of the rhyme scheme and the 3 quatrain-couplet form. The author of this sonnet is deeply in love with the woman to whom this poem is addressed. His deep love is evident because he fears that if he writes the way he sees his love, people will laugh at him and call him a liar. Because he worries so much about writing a sonnet worthy of her beauty and grace, his deep devoted love is apparent.
>
> This sonnet tells the feelings of the author who is very much in love. In the first quatrain he says that if he writes the way he sees her no one would believe him. The author compares his love's beauty to "most high deserts," meaning her beauty and quality are something special that he savors. The author goes

on to say he fears that mere words aren't enough to truly tell of his love's greatness. He says he fears a sonnet would be like a "tomb" that hides her beauty and doesn't tell all her graces.

In the second quatrain the author says if he could find the right words people would call him a liar. He says this because he thinks no one can imagine the true beauty of his lady.

In the final quatrain the author says that if his sonnet is called a lie and scorned there is one way which it can be proven true. In this quatrain the author uses senility in an old man to illustrate the way people will look at his sonnet. He fears people will only think he is making it all up or stretching the truth--as people sometimes "stretch metre of an antique song."

Finally, he resolves that if someone doesn't believe the sonnet there will be another way she lives on. The author says that if his love has a child she will live on in her child. Her beauty will live on in her offspring. Therefore, she shall live twice--in his sonnet and in her child.

I think the order of this sonnet is perfect. I could follow the way the author felt and how his feelings changed through the sonnet. In the first two quatrains the author was trying desperately to find some way to capture the whole beauty of his lover. By the third quatrain I could tell he had some idea of how to do this besides through his sonnet. Finally, in his resolution, the author solved his predicament and his worry ends. He says not only his sonnet illustrates his love's beauty and glory, but her virtues and graces could live on also in her child.

Shawn chose to write on Sonnet 102:

My love is strengthened, though more weak in seeming;
I love not less, though less the show appear;
That love is merchandis'd whose rich esteeming
The owner's tongue doth publish every where.
Our love was new and then but in the spring
When I was wont to greet it with my lays,
As Philomel in summer's front doth sing
And stops her pipe in growth of riper days:
Not that the summer is less pleasant now
Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,
But that wild music burthens every bough
And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.
Therefore like her I sometimes hold my tongue,
Because I would not dull you with my song.

This is an Elizabethan sonnet on the subject of love. The speaker is addressing his girlfriend and explaining why he doesn't always express his love with words and songs.

In the first quatrain he says that love which seems weak may actually be strong, and so his own love isn't necessarily small just because he doesn't show it often. He also claims that people who go around telling everyone how deeply in love they are are actually cheapening their love like a valuable item that is hawked and "merchandiz'd."

In the second quatrain he reminds his love of how he once sang songs about their love, just as the nightingales sing at the beginning of summer. (Philomel was an Athenian princess who was turned into a nightingale.) But now his songs have ceased, just as the nightingale stops singing as summer progresses.

The third quatrain remarks that summer is no less pleasant in the later months than when the nightingales sang. In fact the nightingale songs had grown too numerous, filling every tree, and had lost their special delight by being too common.

The couplet ties together the nightingale image and relates it back to his love for his lady, which is what he began the sonnet with. He says that just like Philomel he sometimes refrains from songs and extravagant expressions of love for fear of their being taken for granted.

The poet's tone seems to be one of rationally explaining his actions.

The third paper I am quoting, from Pat Snodgrass, was <u>not</u> an "A" paper; Pat read much of the poem very well, but went astray on the resolution. I include his paper in this article because even those students who misread something or missed something had <u>most</u> of the sonnet they had chosen. Not a single student, in the approximately 240 I have taught English Literature to, has ever failed to read at least reasonably well the sonnet he or she selected. I am convinced that they all can do it if we expect it initially and then demand it by attaching points to it. They would just find it easier if we didn't. (Pat wrote on Sonnet 109.)

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eyes I ey'd,
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn'd
In process of the seasons have I seen,
Three April perfumes in three Junes yet burn'd,
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.

Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
Steal from his figure and no pace perceiv'd;
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion and mine eye may be deceiv'd:
For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred;
Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.

This is an Elizabethan sonnet because of the rhyme scheme. Although the structure doesn't have three separate sentences forming a quatrain, there are three different comparisons made and contained in the quatrains.

In the first quatrain, the writer is telling his love that she has the same beauty now that she had when he first saw her. He must have met her three years ago because he says ". . .three winters cold. . . ."

In the second quatrain, he makes reference to the fact that three Springs deteriorated into Fall, and three April perfumes were destroyed by June's heat. However, he has known her for three years, and she looks as fresh as ever. She didn't decay like Spring.

In the third quatrain, he speaks of a dial-hand which probably means a clock. He says a clock steals "beauty's figure" but no one detects that it happens because no "pace is perceived."

In the resolution, he says that she is losing her beauty and he can't see it because even before she was born, beauty's Summer died--which means beauty always has and always will fade.

I believe the papers speak for themselves, not necessarily as testimonials to students' ability to write papers, but to students' ability to read sonnets. I think it's important to state that my intention in this project was never to teach students to write papers (though that occurred to some degree). I could not bear to leave students believing that Beowulf contained no action, I could not bear to believe or concede that they couldn't or wouldn't read poetry. I believed that they could, that they should, and that they would if I made it painfully costly with points for them not to do so. Once they had demonstrated that they could, everybody in our room knew that it was fair to expect them to do so.

If you're willing to withstand the screams, I promise you some of the biggest thrills of your lifetime in teaching poetry. You may roam back and forth across the hall (sometimes I am lucky enough to have a spare room to spread my sonnet groups out in) and inconspicuously listen and observe as students ponder sonnets, as they read them aloud to each other, sounding magnificently articulate and lyrical, as they argue over possible interpretations, as they smile at each other when one of them "gets" it. You will be delightfully unnecessary, and it will be one of the biggest thrills of your life. As one student told me in her evaluation comments at the end of the semester,

. . .I liked learning to read poetry, not just reading a few poems, because now I can pick up <u>any</u> poem and have a go at it. I also liked writing explications. I wish I could have done more. They help to put a lot of meaning into a work of literature--and help me to understand it even more.

A Lesson on "How a Poem Means"

Barbara Hager Mercer

I teach College Preparatory English, a semester course for high school seniors which concentrates on the teaching of expository writing--culminating in the teaching of and the writing of a research paper--and an intensive review of English grammar and usage. The course as written into the curriculum is, for the most part, a prescribed course, leaving approximately two weeks for individual teachers to do whatever else they feel their students cannot live without doing prior to entering college. Remembering the truly agonized looks on the faces of many of my college peers when asked to write an analytical essay on a given poem, I knew exactly what I would do with those two weeks when I was assigned the course: in this short space of time, I would teach my students how to read a poem and how to write an analytical essay on that poem.

I begin by telling my students what an analytical essay is not: it is not a line-by-line paraphrase of the poem, nor is it merely a summary of what the poet says "between the lines." After I have said for the first of many times that we are concerned only with the lines themselves and not the space in between, we move on to discover just what it does mean to analyze a poem.

The first assignment that I make is for the students to read John Ciardi's essay, "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," an essay that is nothing short of wonderful as a place to begin. Ciardi does two things in this essay: he discusses how to read poetry at the same time that he analyzes a particular poem--Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Along with reading the essay, I ask the students to make a list of the types of things Ciardi talks about.

After the students have compiled their lists, I call their attention to a few important observations which Ciardi makes:

1. "Poetry, finally, is one poem at a time. To read one poem carefully is the ideal preparation for reading another" (13).

2. "What happens in it [the poem] ? --which is to say, not what does it mean, but how does it mean?" (13)

3. "Poetry cannot be discussed meaningfully unless one can assume that everything in the poem--every last comma and variant spelling--is in it by the poet's specific act of choice" (14).

The first quote helps me to explain to the students why we will read--very carefully--only a few poems rather than many. The second quote brings forth the much-wanted question of "What does he mean by that?" and thus this quote also, along with the third one, then becomes a point of reference for the rest of the two weeks.

At this point I ask the students to begin sharing their "types-of-things" lists. Although the assignment is to list "types" of things, many students relate the list specifically to Frost's poem. When a student does this, I ask the students to generalize that observation so that it is no longer made specifically with regard to "Stopping by Woods. . . ." For instance, a student might comment that Ciardi says the form of the poem is like a drama with three scenes. To begin the list on the board, this would be generalized to "a general statement as to form." As the generalizing process continues, the list includes the following: connotation, denotation, symbolism, figurative language, allusion, rhyme scheme, rhythm, imagery, repetition, style, and background of the poet. As the students understand this generalization process, we then go back to give the list a title--"What One Might Talk about when He Talks about Poetry." As terms are listed, we review what they mean, most students having been introduced to them before.

Ciardi's essay allows the discussion of two other important points, one of which is always identified by a student. At one point in his essay, Ciardi speculates that Frost ends with the repetition of the all-important line "And miles to go before I sleep" because "he had got himself into trouble." Ciardi follows this remark with a discussion of how he presumes that Frost came into a rhyme scheme which forced the end repetition. Then, in what Ciardi calls "a necessary epilogue," he speculates further about how Frost came to the actual setting down of the poem on paper. Inevitably at least one student will express amazement that Ciardi could have this information. Of course, this leads to the observation which must be made that a student writer, who does not as yet have the impressive credentials of Mr. Ciardi, probably would not venture speculation of this kind in his own essay--and that it is speculation, however well-informed. I point out that the student writer would want to discuss only ideas which could be supported with concrete evidence within the poem. The second point which I help the students to focus upon is that the putting together of the observable components of the poem is what makes the discussion theirs personally, that the way in which each writes about "how the poem means" makes the talking about the poem uniquely his own. At this point we discuss Ciardi's own style of writing, but just briefly. I don't want to risk moving the central focus from the poetry, but I do want them to be aware that, given the same set of observations, different persons would talk about them in different ways. Together we find such statements as the following: "Even the TV audience can see that this poem begins as a seemingly-simple incident. . ." (13). I emphasize that this is the way that Ciardi chooses to present an observation, but that anyone else would say "it" in a very different way.

The next two assignments that I give concentrate on the close reading of two poems, one contemporary, one traditional. The first poem that I give is one such as Adrien Stoutenburg's "Skydiver." With this I give a list of questions that I introduce as "questions I had to ask myself in order to read

this poem." I read the poem aloud and then tell the students to answer my questions, adding any of their own which they might need to ask themselves. The questions have to do with specific images, word choice, visual structure, rhyme scheme, and so on. If questions come up which are involving different observations from our original community list, we add that "type" to the list. We then spend one class period reading the poem together, using the questions to guide discussion. The second poem that I give is always a sonnet, and often a Shakespearean one. The sonnet is such a good form for emphasizing how the general form of a poem can guide a reader's understanding of the organization of the poet's thought. This time the assignment is to read the sonnet and to make a complete list of questions and observations that each person has to answer or make in order to read the poem. Many students make the observation that the poem seems to be written in some special form (I have not mentioned the word sonnet), but that they do not know what it is. After writing their observations on the board--such things as fourteen lines with a set rhyme scheme, someone usually remembers the term sonnet, at which time we review all aspects of this form. We then share all observations and questions, helping each other to read the poem. Again we add any new "types" of observations to our general list.

By this time many students have made remarkable progress in knowing what types of observations can be made. Reminding them that the eventual goal is for them to be able to write about these observations in an essay, I then move to the next phase which is to give them a poem on which I have written an analytical essay. I first give them the poem without my essay with the instructions to read the poem and make a list of observations and questions. I like to use Hopkins' "God's Grandeur" because it is a different kind of sonnet. It not only gives us new "types" of things to talk about, but it is fun to see the students recognize a sonnet form and get excited because they do recognize it. After spending a class period to read the poem, guided by their observations and questions, I give them my essay. This is fun too because they are observably astounded that their very own English teacher can actually write!

We use my essay in two ways. First, we go through each paragraph to see what "types" of things are talked about and what new "types" could be added to the original list of "what one might talk about. . . ." I then have the students identify the thesis statement, topic sentences and illustrations--in effect, to outline my essay. Someone usually makes the comment that when we read the poem, we said some things that were not discussed in the essay. This observation easily opens a discussion in which we conclude that one talks only about what his thesis allows him to talk about and that one introduces only those observations which can be discussed in the light of the meaning of the total poem. We do, after all, want to show "how the poem means."

At this point, I am ready to have the students try to write an analytical essay. I usually give a choice of three poems. If some weaker students are in the class, I allow one choice to be a poem that we have discussed, but not the one about which I have written. This final assignment is in three parts: first, the student is asked to make a list of observations and questions on the poem he will write about; second, he is asked to come up with a thesis and a tentative outline; and third, he is asked to write his analytical essay. I supervise very carefully steps one and two, both of which are done in class.

The assignments which I have described are fun and exciting to do with college preparatory seniors. The resulting essays are sometimes a bit clumsy by some standards and sometimes remarkably well-written by anyone's standards. Setting aside the writing of those first essays, though, there remains the fact that virtually every student in the class can read poetry far better than he ever could before, and every student knows by the end of the two weeks what Ciardi meant when he said, "What happens in it? --which is to say, not what does it mean, but how does it mean?"

Work Cited

Ciardi, John. "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," Saturday Review, 12 April 1958, pp. 13-15.

Yeah, but

Count the syllables, Wystan.
(Damnit, must I also explain syllables?)
Wallace, the first letter,
look for words with the same first letter.
No, Philip, the MID-dle word
rhymes with it. Emily, I refuse
to explain hyperbole again. Keep your
head about your shoulders when you
talk poetry.

Yes, Mary, yes, the light is God!
No, no, the tree is not
The water is
Sigmund-fying nothing.

Nobody can spell it anyway, Adam,
just know that it sounds like
what it's supposed to be.
Pssst, yourself, Eve.
Leave Adam alone.

But
But, ma'm, are you sure?
And how do you know anyway?
Did they really mean
for all this to happen?

Sylvia Sarrett

Poetry Writing in Elementary School: Gaining by Giving Up

Joyce Pyle

Teaching elementary children to write poetry is a matter of giving up--giving up dependence on the language text, giving up spare time, and giving up the protective image you may have established for yourself.

Intimidation would seem to be part of the job requirement for the elementary teacher. Besides feeling somewhat threatened by parents and administrators, I had to fight feeling guilty when I used anything other than the textbook for language instruction. Eventually, however, I realized that the language book bored both the children and me (I guess I hate being bored more than I fear being threatened), and I began to depend on the text less and less. I still use it some because creating a writing program is difficult and a little scary. Now, however, I feel guilty when I revert to the language book (I can't bear to give up the guilt).

Having given up complete dependence on the text left me with the frightening and exciting task of developing my own style of teaching writing. This takes a great deal of time: time to think, read, evaluate, listen, create, and teach. In my fifth grade class, I spend an hour of instructional time a day on teaching writing with at least one month on the writing of poetry.

All time spent on writing, especially on writing poetry, isn't "time on task." The children and I do a lot of talking. We talk about the thoughts, fears, aspirations, and events that shape us. This sharing goes on daily. I try to capitalize on the unique bond between students and their teacher. Elementary students know their teacher intimately; they see not just what we choose to show, but all of our moods, reactions, strengths, and weaknesses. I try to take advantage of this relationship. My willingness to reveal what makes me laugh and cry seems to give the children permission to risk sharing something of themselves and builds a climate of acceptance which allows them to write with depth and feeling.

As I begin our work on writing poetry, I read many kinds of poems to the class. I try to help them <u>feel</u> the difference between poetry and prose. Somewhere along the way I'd like students to come up with these observations: (1) Poetry is viewing events, feelings, and ideas in a way that is unique to the viewer; (2) Poetry can use contrast and comparison effectively; and (3) It is important for the poet to economize on words and to use specific words that appeal to the senses. Helping students to realize these things is done gradually and continually as we talk about and listen to poetry.

For poetry as well as for prose, prewriting exercises are a must! I use

these to loosen the children up, to teach similes and metaphors, and to emphasize the use of concrete words that show rather than tell what the writer is trying to express. To help students to think creatively, I have used this exercise: Write a wish which contains a color, a comic strip character, and a city. ("I wish Snoopy would turn pink and drink rootbeer in New York City.") As they get into this, they begin to make up their own "rules" for wishes. Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (New York: Random, 1970) is a good source for activities of this sort.

Another prewriting activity which I use is to pass around an object--a ruler, vase, or box, for example. Each child tells a use for it other than the one for which it was intended. Doing this is fast, fun, and stimulating to the imagination.

Similes can be introduced by listing words under these headings:

What	How it goes	As/Like
mouse	scampers	as quick as. . .

Or, sometimes I work on similes by having students use an abstraction (e.g., loneliness) and develop the following formula:

loneliness sounds like _____
smells like _____
looks like _____
tastes like _____
feels like _____

Later, if students substitute "is" for "sounds like," they learn how to say something effectively with fewer words--and how to compose metaphors.

Formula poems are great to show students that they can, indeed, write a poem. A simple simile poem might be four lines:

simile, lines 1-2	The dog, cold and lonely As a deserted snowman,
4 words describing subject	Shivering, sad, hungry, unhappy,
-ing phrase describing subj.	Hoping to see a friendly face.

It's easier to feel successful if students are given some direction--a form to use or some idea about the content.

To help them write more concretely, I do a lot of questioning. For example, if they choose to write about a flower, I ask: What kind? Tulip. What color? Red. Red as what? Red as a fire truck. How big? Great big. Big as this desk? No. Big as what? Etc. I am relentless in my questioning until they have better defined what they are trying to say. I also never miss an opportunity to point out words which use a lot of sensory detail from their writing, as well as from other poems and stories which we read.

I spend a good deal of time helping students to see the difference between telling and showing how to communicate ideas. For instance, I will give

an example of telling ("The animal ran away") and ask them to show this ("The green snake slithered into the tall grass"). We do several exercises changing telling to showing. My children have enjoyed changing such lines as these: "Talk about a cheap motel!" "Shirley is a junk-food junkie," "The rain changed everything quickly," "Jim got the worst end of the fight."

Talking is an important prewriting activity. Before any writing assignment, we brainstorm as a group. If we plan to write a poem about old people (an idea that has worked well with my kids), we first talk about the old people we know, about what it must feel like to be old, and about how we treat the elderly. Then I write on the board words they think of to describe old people. I try not to make any judgment as I write. Just when they think they're through, I nudge them to think of more. This is where the creativity begins; they, like all of us, state the obvious first.

As they begin to write, I give them quiet time to think and get started before I move around the room to see how they're doing. I read aloud some good examples and elicit responses to my questions: What do you like best? Why? Why did I choose this phrase? We pick out concrete words, offer help if a student is stuck, and discuss the things that make the piece sound like a poem, always keeping our comments positive.

If a child can't get started, I will sit with him or her and will hold a private brainstorming session in the same way we did as a group. I write down the ideas the student comes up with so that he or she will have something to work with when I leave. Usually I find one or two good lines that I read to the class for their comment and praise. At the end of a writing session, anyone who wants to read his or her poem may.

Doing these things takes a lot of time, but the children understand before we start that they may not finish and that they will probably have to rewrite, so they don't feel pressured for a finished product. I usually collect their writing because I am anxious to see what they've done. As I go through their papers, I try to underline words or phrases I like. I write the same kinds of questions I've asked during the prewriting session, and I always find something positive to say. (Yes, it's hard sometimes, but it can be done.)

I choose some poems to copy (we are lucky enough to have a copier, but I have done this with an overhead projector or copied items on a ditto master) for editing, or "hauling trash." We edit as a group, looking for ways to economize on words and identifying concrete sensory images that help clarify what the writer means. This spring, for instance, I copied Karl's writing about his Aunt Grace for us to edit. He had written it almost as prose: "I have an aunt. Her name is Grace. She makes apple dolls . . . ." I asked if there were some words Karl could leave out and still retain his idea. The class wrote these first lines: "My Aunt Grace/Makes apple dolls." Simple enough. I asked them to write another line using Karl's next idea, and they offered several suggestions. Karl picked the one to use in his poem. We worked this way until we were all satisfied with the poem:

My Aunt Grace
makes apple dolls,
stores them with
plates of china.
She names them
for people she likes
    Miss Kitty
    Bob Hope
    The Lone Ranger, Tonto,
    and Harry S Truman
    (etc., etc., etc.)
I love her,
My aunt!

And so did we.

We use the same procedure with other poems. As students have become used to my constant questioning, they begin, at last, to ask questions of their own. Whenever possible, I use the children's work to teach. They are thrilled to have their work chosen and copied for "hauling trash." It is far more relevant and interesting than "the book's" examples.

It is important to write for many audiences. We "publish" in several ways. Using big primary tablet paper and different colored magic markers, we put our poems in the hall. We bind books of collections of poems using vinyl wallpaper samples for book covers. I send one of the completed books home with a child each night to be shared with his or her family. Since the poems are based on a simple formula which is included in the book, I invite parents to write poems of their own. I enter students' poems in every creative writing contest I can find and even send some to children's magazines for publication (or rejection). Writing for the teacher isn't enough, and children tend to work harder when their poems get published.

The excitement and pure joy I feel when I read even one poetic phrase from the most unlikely child is well worth the "giving up" of text, time, and security. I am hopeful that I transmit this pleasure to my students and that they can experience the thrill of creating something unique to them.

A personal note: Often, by the time I've read yet another article about the successes of some teacher, I've grown to hate him or her. I have a mental image of a highly organized, energetic, attractive, young teacher dealing with a class of twenty motivated, bright students who have no discipline problems. I usually develop a bad case of "Yes. . .but." However, after I've struggled to write this article, I can see how this false image presents itself. Naturally, I've been reluctant to mention my failures. After all, this article is limited to 2,500 words.

Teaching Poetry Writing

Maryfrances Wagner

I teach with the philosophy that students rise to the level of a teacher's expectations within reasonable and fair demands. I have always taught with high standards and feel that some teachers often expect too little or stop too short. To expect or accept less may make teaching, planning, and grading seem easier, but, as a result, there is less challenge, stimulation, and reward.

Once at a meeting I heard a teacher say, "How can you expect a teenager to know anything? So what could teenagers possibly have to say? Nothing, obviously, so I never expect them to say anything in the first place." I disagree. I have seen the opposite demonstrated and not infrequently. To see this, though, the teacher must unlock and validate the storehouse young people carry around in their heads. Brainstorming and prewriting exercises, techniques with which most teachers are by now familiar, usually work well for this. Teaching students how to think through an idea causes them to examine and revise words, metaphors, ideas. For example, an interesting metaphor is still worthless unless it moves the poem toward its whole or accurately clarifies or expands an idea. Otherwise, why make the comparison at all?

I have included in this article some of the techniques that I find useful in teaching poetry. On the first day of class, I hand students a list of standards that serve as a goal, an end product we will seek. I tell them that through practice, exercise, and concentration on one skill at a time, we will build toward that goal. These are the STANDARDS that I use.

1. Fresh, unexpected, but exact word choice. This is the skill I begin with and spend the most time on. I offer dittos of phrases or lines I've collected that demonstrate freshness. Here are a few: "He carries a bleeding starfish in a dixie cup," "spidery dark of stairs," "light falls through cracks the way swordblades pierce a magician's box," "I used to crayola my limp noodle signature," "his sneakers leak ballbearings." I also give them a list of words not to use, such as roses, tears, oak trees, butterflies, daisies, and crystal and "opinion" words such as beautiful, exciting, fun, wonderful, great, vast, limitless, infinite, neverending. They keep this list in their journals and add to it the clichés and weak, abstract words they actually use. I find it useful to operate from their own language and their own errors. One way of expanding what they think their vocabulary limit might be is to offer a warmup that is a contest of who can list the most flowers. (I also use birds, trees, and other objects.) I've had some students come up with over a hundred, but I've never had anyone list fewer than twenty, so I ask, "If you can name that many flowers, why do you always write 'roses' or 'daisies' ('robin' or 'oak')?" If they respond, as many will,

with "Because that's what it was," we talk about how the point, the feeling, or the idea must remain true, but the selection of details is part of the art.

2. Concise language. We work toward not wasting words. If words can be removed without affecting the meaning, we take them out. We talk about compressing phrases: "The sun fills my body with warmth" becomes "Sun warms me," "wheezed with great effort" becomes "wheezed" as the word implies effort, "He clutches onto his cheap bottle of wine, his very lifeline" becomes "He clutches his cheap wine," and we may talk about naming a particularly well-known cheap wine. Similarly, "Droplets of perspiration were embedded on the tip of my nose" becomes "Perspiration beaded my nose," "My whites were clung to my body like another layer of skin" becomes "My whites clung," and "The smell of bacon frying infiltrates and stays in the air" becomes "Morning's bacon lingers."

3. Clarity of thought to a universal audience. The student soon realizes that he cannot follow his poem around and explain to everyone what he meant to say. The poem must speak for itself. When I tell a student that I find his thoughts unclear, his idea too abstract, I ask him to tell me what he means. Only the two of us hear that. I ask the student to read the poem aloud, and then the class writes down exactly what they think the poet said. The answers will be different, the point made. Also, any time a student says, "What I meant to say," or any variation of that, I stop him and reply, "Write down what you are about to tell me. If you have to explain what should be clear, you did not draw the picture clearly."

4. Imagery that draws a vivid picture or offers sensory appeal through concrete, specific details. I feel that good images can often make a poem. Good images also are the result of good word choice. Once students understand detail, creating images almost comes automatically. I give them examples: "steams buttery biscuits," "oiled my ears to catch the creak of a grasshopper's jaw," "thin spray on scrubbed air," "pocking of shoes on stone," "the ferns breathe cinnamon," "the basement lady calls her cat," "fireflies burned holes into heaven," "moth wings on the window screen slow and drop away like film lapping the spool." I have them write images that appeal to each of the senses, and we share them and discuss why some work better than others.

5. Show, don't tell. I ask students to get me to feel what they keep trying to tell me by drawing the picture so vividly that I will automatically conclude what they are trying to say. One way that I try to get them away from opinion words is to ask everyone to describe in one sentence a "beautiful" or "exciting" thing. When students write about entirely different subjects, I can make the point that "beautiful" and "exciting" are not universal pictures. I don't teach this as a separate step but talk about it while teaching word choice, metaphor, and imagery.

6. Metaphor/simile. Metaphor, imagery, and word choice will soon start to overlap as they should. I insist that metaphors must be apt, accurate, and striking. One way to demonstrate this is to offer ten or more striking examples: "there in the bed like a clothespole fallen under the sheets off the line," "my eyes are sharp as new pencils," "succulent as a burst apricot," "feeling the dog paws my hands have become," "snail-nosed babies," "moth-breath," "he hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom." I follow

that up by giving students a skeleton of a simile and having them fill in blanks: "The nights_____out of sight like a ____ _____." Then each student reads his example. A comparison or idea that recurs will show students that their ideas are not original. After everyone reads, I ask the class to repeat the phrases that have lingered and to tell why. Then I tell them what the poet wrote--"The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid." Students catch on quickly. Some of their examples are as good as the original. This method can work on any level as the teacher never has to mention the word simile. The structure alone will draw one.

7. Consistent flow, tone, connotation, and voice. After discussing connotation and writing examples of denotative words and of words with positive and negative connotations (short, petite, dumpy), we discuss how a poem's mood or tone must remain the same and should suit the subject. A poem about death, for instance, should not employ cute or charming phrases. I also show students four or five poems with different tones (for example, "Awakening" by Robert Bly, "Five Ways to Kill a Man" by Edwin Brock, "Funny Fantasies" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Lesson of the Moth" by Don Marquis, "The Addict" by Anne Sexton, "Preludes" by T. S. Eliot), and we list words charged with connotation that create the tone.

8. Sound. We work with rhythm, beat, pause, and some tricks with language, but I strongly discourage students from writing in verse. I do believe that beginners cannot write in verse--it's too hard. I tell them if they write a poem in which I do not notice the rhyme, then that's fine. Some students want that challenge despite the teacher's discouraging position. Last semester a student wrote a Shakespearean sonnet, and I didn't notice until she told me, and she didn't tell me until I told her she had done an excellent job. Part of why I did not notice was because she did not rely on exact rhyme. I also teach eye, masculine, feminine, slant, and near rhyme. Most students who rhyme, though, usually force words, select more general ideas for the sake of rhyme, and end up with sing-songy rhythms--all instances of bad writing. I favor discussing line placement--structuring a poem so the reader will read it as the poet intends it to sound. We talk about line flow with enjambment and about forcing the reader to stop or pause by having punctuation at the end of a line.

9. Structure. I teach free verse, but first I dismiss the set notion that free verse means slapping words anywhere one chooses. I do believe in the theory that being confined in a bottle teaches the writer how to break the rules, so I discuss meter, scansion, pattern, and traditional forms and have them write at least two poems in traditional forms or patterns. One of those two, however, can be in an invented but consistent pattern. We also talk about beats and internal sounds within words and phrases.

10. Control of idea. Students need to avoid "bigness" or large concepts they really do know very little about (in comparison to adults) such as "death," "life," "the universe," and "time," and instead to concentrate on one thing about "death" that they know--the death of a hamster in third grade, for instance, or one thing about "time" such as the first time they quit going outside after dinner to play kickball. Simplicity and singleness of effect produce better poems. Writing about one example is still saying something about the whole concept.

11. Avoid sentimentality. Anyone who pulls the heartstrings through sentiment or syrupy language may be true to his feelings, may move Mom or best friend Joan, but the writer is not being true to his art. Part of the success of this effort involves a discussion of private versus public audience. One of the reasons I encourage students to submit their work and enter contests is to extend the range of their audiences and force them to speak to strangers. At first, sharing poems with fellow classmates scares them, but in time they establish strong bonding from working together and such a sense of criticizing and improving poems that they need the ears of strangers. Attention to audience also focuses students' voice and word choice,and it becomes more important to them that the audience see a picture similar to the poet's particular experience as opposed to a general idea or feeling they were content with before. Over the years, I've developed some avoidance tactics: "Don't write about old men or women on park benches, happy-faced clowns who are sad inside, or the freedom of butterflies." I also suggest they avoid words that trigger sentimentality: limp, dying, tattered and torn, tears.

MODELS. For any assignment, I offer students outstanding examples by professional writers and former students. The former-student examples show them exactly the quality students can attain. Examples must be good. Usually, students will render work no better than the examples they see because (1) they still won't know what "best" is and (2) they will assume that what the teacher shows is the best expected. If the teacher offers only professional models, the students will know that they can't write a metaphor as well as Maxine Kumin, but professional models are important nonetheless in showing students what the best writers attain. Reading and exposing students to contemporary poems is therefore important. I read to find good models or poems as I personally feel most textbooks don't suit the exact need of a specific assignment. For those teachers who read little contemporary poetry, let me recommend poetry by Maxine Kumin, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Bly, John Woods, Bill Kloefkorn, Gary Gilner, Pablo Neruda, and Diane Wakoski as good sources of examples.

ONE-ON-ONE INSTRUCTION. The best learning and teaching seem to happen one-on-one. Then the teacher works with an individual's personal style and ability. One-on-one instruction enables the teacher to challenge better students to produce higher quality work and to keep weaker, less enthusiastic students from feeling intimidated. Students realize that the problems discussed, whether they be word choice or mechanics, are their own, and they are more willing to listen and learn. One-on-one also enables teachers to understand and know students better so that they can unlock the storehouse and get to ideas those students can write about. This method also shows students that teachers care about them as individuals and believe they have something to say. In this way, a mutual respect can grow.

OFFERING SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS. It's easy to say "Eliminate passive voice" or to label words "general," "trite," "abstract," or "vague," and teachers can stand at the board all hour explaining those markings. For a few students, that might be enough. Usually students will accept such remarks on their papers and even know that they make these errors, but most students will repeat the errors because they still don't know how to eliminate them from

their own writing. Using students' own work, I show them how to change the passive to the active or how to change opinionated words like beautiful into concrete examples: thus "Darkness is beautiful" becomes "When darkness is a long black gown dotted with stars," "Life is happy" becomes "Children's laughter stretches across the softball field," and "I didn't like the boy" becomes "I erased Charles Michol's face from the class picture." I tell them that my example is only one way to demonstrate what they are trying to say, and, since I wrote it, they will have to compose their own. I find that it usually takes three or four suggestions before students really understand, but they go back to their seats knowing what to do. During one-on-one sessions, the rest of the class is either working on a poem individually or working together in groups.

REVISION. To me, revision is the secret of learning how to write better. I may send a student back five or ten times for one word, one line, or a way to visualize an idea, always stressing what is good about the poem at the same time. I tell them a poet once told me he'd spent eight weeks looking for one word. Positive statements are important, but never do I reinforce bad writing. I may say, "It's an improvement" or "It's better" or "Because this image is so good, I think you'd really improve the overall poem if you brought the other images up to that same quality," but to reinforce bad writing is a disadvantage to the student's ultimate accomplishment, and too many students will stop growing as soon as teachers give up or accept less than they know students can perform. In the one-on-one process, the teacher learns to work with each student differently. Some frustration will result, but frustration is an ingredient of growth. Students, like everyone else, learn when they don't succeed. Usually anything easily or quickly completed is not very good, and it certainly is not the best work the student can do. Obviously teachers can't expect the same ends from all students, but working one-on-one enables students to work at their own pace, on their own level with all students reaching different goals as their abilities allow them.

INCENTIVE. Praise, I find, is still the highest reward, especially when it comes from a teacher who parcels out criticism. When the student finally hears an enthusiastic "That's it!" it's a joyous moment for student and teacher. Sharing and displaying work are important too. I don't limit displayed work to the classroom. I display poems all over the building—in the library, in showcases, in the cafeteria, in the counseling center--anywhere I think people will see and read the work. Encouraging students to enter contests and to try for publication has a double dividend as the student also becomes conscious of that unknown audience he can't follow around to explain what he meant to say. Having students study "tips for breaking in" listed with publications in Writer's Market will reinforce instruction given in class. Students realize those standards are universal when editors say, "No sentimentality. . .nothing about butterflies, roses or breaking up with a boyfriend" or "We're looking for fresh, concrete details and striking images."

PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC. I differentiate at the beginning between public and private poems. Nothing is wrong with private, personal poems written for family, friends, or mates. Those poems need to be written too, but they are not universal. I have already touched on this in this article, but

I would emphasize it here: students learn that the clearer and more specific their ideas, the more likely the unknown reader will respond as they intended.

These are a few of the ideas that I use, and I hope they will be useful to others. I must concede one point, though. When I have given workshops on how to teach poetry writing, several teachers have said, "It's easier because you are a poet." I have to agree that having published books and poems in periodicals does establish credibility faster, but I don't think it is necessary for a teacher to be a professional writer. I do, however, think it is important that teachers are able to perform what they expect of students. Persons who teach poetry writing should practice the writing of poetry, and I strongly recommend that such teachers participate in at least one of the many available poetry-writing workshops given by professional poets.

If I were to pick what I feel is the most important thing to stress to students learning to write poetry, I would concentrate on detailed word choice, metaphors, and imagery. Even a student who does not have much to say can learn to write good images, and William Carlos Williams went far on that. Concentrating on these skills can be productive even if the teacher is limited to a unit on poetry writing, and it also helps to strengthen a student's expository and fiction-writing skills. I think many students are willing to take on a challenge if they find it worthwhile, stimulating, and attainable. I believe, too, that expecting high standards of achievement will raise students' desire for excellence, will help them develop more discriminating taste, and will please and satisfy the teacher who worked just as hard from beginning to end.

The Teacher as Poet: "A Place for the Genuine"

Virginia Frazier

"I, too, dislike it" is Marianne Moore's audacious opening declaration in "Poetry" (316). She continues: "Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,/ one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine" (emphasis mine). Eve Merriam's imperative in "How to Eat a Poem" is "Don't be polite./ Bite in" (15). English teachers may find that their own attitudes towards the teaching of poetry lie someplace between the two extremes.

I teach both my own poetry and that of others to my high school students because I cannot help it. It is as natural to me as talking. Moreover, poetry is an integral part of a whole language curriculum. I don't set aside a "block of time" for a "unit" of poetry. Poetry must come off the pedestal on which it is sometimes placed and live in the everyday life of the classroom. In my classes, we are always on the way to someplace else. Poetry helps us get there. I'll pull out a poem and teach it any time it's useful. Poetry taught in units from pages of an anthology is simply on its way to the next page, the next poem. That's what students will remember--words arranged in linear fashion on a printed page. They will not truly "experience" poetry.

More than does any other genre, poetry seems to me to be infused with the kind of vitality that narrows the gap between humankind and the environment (a harsh one, a nearly hopeless one for many students), that personalizes the impersonal, that concerns itself with a sometimes brilliant triviality, that transforms the tight-rope walk of life into a ballet of dancing words. In fact, I titled my own collection of poetry Choreographing the Nonsense because the words state my philosophy of life: we must not only see and make patterns out of the seeming disorders, paradoxes, ambiguities of life, but also make some sense out of it all if we are to survive.

Poetry has form yet escapes that form when the reader brings to it experience, curiosity, creative thinking. Poetry, once it has escaped the necessary cage of form, may be compared to Dean Acheson's statement about Communism: It is like spilling a bucket of water. It runs everywhere before it can be mopped up. Poetry lies lifeless on the printed page until it is fused with a reader who understands the poem, who sees the deliberate purpose in the order of the individual words that make the poem a totality symbolically, metaphorically, imagistically. Serious poetry confronts both the fearful and the beautiful; it can, if we will let it, rescue us (I include students in the pronoun). Since life absorbs everything, I have to question (as do students) whether or not some things

are too petty or too cruel for art--a question to which I have no answer, except that I know life is petty; life is cruel. Life can and does kill. Poetry records that experience.

From my poetry and that of others, I hope to make students aware of variety, the strength of a poem, concreteness, feelings (of the participants in the poem, the speaker, the author, the reader), diction, the economy (or lack of it), voices, ranges of tones (philosophical, rhapsodic, whimsical or fanciful, truthful, realistic--all sorts of combinations). Although I may not have listed a poem on my lesson plan for a specific class period, I may turn to a poem in answer to a question, to illustrate, to enrich experience, for release from tension. It is imperative, I think, for a teacher to know much poetry from memory, to be familiar with a wide variety of types and subjects of poetry (particularly modern poetry), to keep teachable poems handy.

Any hall-loiterer would hear shouts from Room 204 (my teaching home for 27 years) on the first day of school, for I read Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts" to show that our class will not concentrate simply on naming the parts. The reader of Reed's poem must use two voices--that of the tough old soldier who has taught thousands of young men to name the parts of the guns they have not yet been issued and that of the dreamy young soldier whose silent retorts about "japonica blossoms" and "honey-bees" are more real to him than death on a battlefield. The poem is excellent for teaching blended voices and the inter-relation of overtones. I follow this with my own "Cleaning Miss Mary's House" (appended), to illustrate both the two voices as well as the use of irony and paradox. In my classes in English literature which I usually teach by chronology (with detours here and there), we are then ready for "The Sea-Farer," with its old man's voice of experience and its youth's dream of the sea.

In my composition classes on the first day, I may "set the climate for writing" by reading my own "Writing Right" (appended), a poem which Beth Nelms (Hickman High School, Columbia, Mo.) says she often uses for the same purpose. I may follow that poem with William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," with its strong concrete images and its sense of mystery. I also like to use in any class May Swenson's "Southbound on the Freeway" (82), with its intriguing opening: "A tourist came in from Orbitville,/ parked in the air, and said:". I love to pause while students think, "What did the tourist say?" Students, too, must write the kinds of "openings" that will make a reader go on to see what is said.

For teaching rhythm, my favorite poem from my own collection is "Choreographing the Nonsense: a Trilogy" (appended). The first poem, "My Cousin Taught Me to Square Dance," is in square-dance rhythm; the second, "False Valse," is a waltz; and the third, "Lipstick on Your Belly-Button," is a polka. Some brave students will dare to be silly and actually "dance" the poem. This one trilogy with its life-death theme gives me the opportunity to teach many other aspects of poetry.

I am no exception to the poets who write poetry about poetry. In 142 Ways to Make a Poem, James W. Swanson presents eleven poems on this subject, ranging from those of Eve Merriam and Charles Simic to those of

Gary Snyder and Richard Wilbur (79-88). I use these plus my own "Woman Poet" (appended) and "A Poem Is Not an Invitation" (appended) because they relate to students' attitudes about poetry.

My classes write an autobiographical essay each year, in which they may include poetry. Since we dredge the past for prewriting of childhood memories, I seize this opportunity to read poems of truth from my childhood: "The Gageby Girls," "Slow Joe," and "One Big Standpipe and I" (all appended). The author stands vulnerable before her students, the author whom they may ask anything and be answered. A method I use for many poems is to have students write, "If you could ask the author anything you wanted to, what would you ask?" When students ask me about my poems, I am amazed at the difference between what I thought I said (and meant) and what they thought the poem said (and meant). My answers to their questions may come back sifted by the culture I live in and by my own unique personality as a poet, for my poetry is, I think, a blend of the societal and of my personality. By sharing the poems, I have opened the "inner person" to the world, which (for me) takes a bit of courage.

Eventually, we will get to Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." Once we have studied the poem, I return to the eighth stanza, beginning "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power." and tell the story of Lee Andrews, a convicted Kansas killer, who wrote that stanza from memory during his last hour of life. Then I read "Cub-House" (appended). Not only is this a modern tie-in with an eighteenth-century poem, but it also provides opportunity to emphasize that the writer of a poem may take on any voice. I am not the cub reporter; I have merely adopted his voice. I also read some of my own elegies, really "private poems," a distinction which students need to be taught.

"Bottom Acres" and "The Governor's Garden" (appended) are poems of reflection, of comparison and contrast. I really lived on a Missouri River bottom farm during the first five years of my married life, but the poem mixes fact with fiction from Willa Cather's writings. I really saw the Governor's Garden just as I described it, but I pulled the image of the little boys from another time, another river. In these two poems, my students can see poetry as a vehicle which carries man's deep thoughts and emotions. They see also that poetry has its own reality, even when, by its very nature, that reality is a fiction. The very fact that the poem lies on a printed page is truth. The experience for "The Governor's Garden" came four years before I wrote the poem. The image haunted me. As usual, I was pregnant with a poem that wanted birthing.

I suggest that teachers write poetry and teach it. For years, I was an Emily Dickinson hiding my creations. But I have enjoyed audience, which any piece of writing needs. The poetry represented here is not necessarily my best. It does represent, however, some of the poems that I have found useful in teaching. I have improved as a poet by reading my poetry to students, not because it feeds the ego but because students are genuinely good critics. I use much poetry without comment on the author at all, unless students ask who wrote the poem. Basically, students are not in class to help me improve as a poet; I'm there to help them. They know, however, that I go through the writing process as an act of love (possibly

compulsion), and that increases their respect for all poets. I may well be asked, "When there is a plethora of great/good poetry available, how do you justify taking class time for your own?" I would like to hear from other teacher-poets on that. I doubt that any teacher would use the classroom to show-case his or her own poetry. I use my poetry because it is the poetry I know from the inside out. I impose nothing on it.

When in moments of introspection I question myself about teaching my own poetry with that of the good and the great poets, I go to the last lines of Marianne Moore's "Poetry," and my faith in what I am doing is re-affirmed:

> . . .if you demand on the one hand,
> the raw material of poetry in
> all its rawness and
> that which is on the other hand
> genuine, then you are interested in poetry (316).

I am more than interested.

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Appendix

Editor's note: You have the author's permission to re-produce for classroom use the poems written by Virginia Frazier provided that they are identified as follows: Copyright © Virginia Frazier. Those poems previously published should be so acknowledged. No commercial use may be made of these poems.

Cleaning Miss Mary's House

My Mamma clean Miss Mary's house
Every Friday and I go along.
Miss Mary's house it fine, fancy--oh, my!
Mamma say, "Don't touch, don't break, let dat alone."
But Miss Mary lemme look all I want
At the silver and all the fambly stuff.
I love that stuff. Wish it was mine and I was rich.

Sometimes Miss Mary give me somethin
To take home 'cause she don't need it no more.
Mamma say, "Son, yo don take that, did ya?"
I say, "No, Mamma. Miss Mary give it to me."
Mamma polish and clean and scrub
And dust de clutter
'Til that house shine, it do, every Friday.
Can't count de years.

Today they're burying Miss Mary
From the fine funeral parlor on Broad Street.
My Mamma go and sit in de back.
But yesterday (not Friday)
She clean Miss Mary's house
For all de company and relatives.
I don't have to go no more.

And today, I'm cleanin Miss Mary's house.

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Writing Right

Writing Right
Don't mean writin
Everything jus right.

Writing Right
Don't mean going right across the page.
I'm gonna write right

About my old fishing pole
The 10-pound cat that
Fought my new Zebco two hours

About my red bike
Flat-tired and rusty in the wash-house
Because I drive the Scout now

(Fast on the country roads
Cutting curves at sixty
To rattle the bridge grandpappy built).

About the rattlesnake
I stoned to death--
Got fourteen rattles in my pocket.

About the snow-geese
Consuming corn in just-picked fields
Scattering scared at a stray shot.

Writing Right
Means I got a right
To spin my dreams and memories
On paper.

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MEB/72

Choreographing the Nonsense: A Trilogy

My Cousin Taught Me to Square-Dance

In a little town in Illinois
Where his father was a Baptist preacher
Who raised money and morality
While the kids raised hell,

My cousin taught me to square-dance.
While his heart healed from jilting,
We laughed our way through my sixteenth summer.

Grab your partner and do si do
Round and round the floor we go.
Now circle to the left and circle to the right.
"Good going, Gin. We'll dance all night."

And we did, at Fountain Green, years ago.
At his funeral last year, I stared at his casket
And saw my old Tangee lipstick
On his belly-button.

False Valse

I could have waltzed with you all night
Had there been a dance floor,
To the music of the glorious violins.

We sang waltzes instead,
Showing off for each other the tenor and soprano,
Blissfully ignoring the stares.

Until they played the "Anniversary Waltz."
"Twenty-six years for me," you said.
"Twenty-five for me just this fall."

To the table you said, "Music brings back the old loves.
I loved a girl in New York who loved the piano more."
I whispered in your ear, "What of the new loves?"

We stood to walk with the others--
My head on your shoulder--
Into the Minnesota winds.

"We should waltz in Vienna someday."
"That day will never come. But
I wouldn't get lipstick on your belly button."

Lipstick on Your Belly-Button

Teach me to polka.
    Yes, of course; I'm very good at it.
You're good at many things.
    True. You should see me waltz.
Oh, I love the waltz. Someday, I'll waltz in Vienna.
    Yes, you will. But not with me.
There's the music. Let's start.
    You'll have to stand up first.
I am standing. Now my right hand goes--
    Here. And put your left hand here, your arm just so.
Ah, I love the rhythms. My right foot--
    Like this and your left and your. . .
I've got it! Da da tum tum. Da da tum tum
    Quit singing. You're out of step. Why did you stop?
I can't do the polka with you.
I've got lipstick on your belly-button!

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Woman Poet

She was just past middle age
With a bowl-shaped black hat
Jammed on her head--
Drooping ribbons
Like soft hounds ears over her eyes.

Then she spoke in a gravelly voice,
And she was a poet all right,
Talking about someone
"With as much brains as a squashed pumpkin,"
And salting it all with four letter words,
Interspersing uh-anduh-welluh-uh.

I guess you can't tell a poet
By looking at one
Or by hearing one.

Just how can you tell a poet?

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MEB/74

A Poem Is Not an Invitation

A poem is not an invitation,
Complete with R. S. V. P.
To which you must make answer.

Nor is it to be taken apart in bites, as a critic said,
And you need not agree with Marianne Moore,
"I, too, dislike it" (although you may).

A poem is an uninvited guest
Come unbidden to your door,
And you may treat it as such:
Ignore it.
Send the message you're not home.
Tell it you are busy.
Get rid of it fast.
Treat it summarily.
Welcome it warmly.
Invite it in to stay with you.
Hold it close.
Lodge it in your heart's house.
And maybe love it.

A poem is not an invitation,
Nor an obligation:
It is but an uninvited guest.

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Slow Joe

Where fish crawl slow in the mud of the Missouri
Where the sullen rocks and green-brown hills wait
Their eternity for the Redmen's return
Where blueflies gather with mosquito hordes
And bull frogs croak the ancient arguments

Slo' Joe builds the shack that shelters him
From the raw river, ready with sling-shot and knife
For poachers or thieves--
The spittle sluicing ever from his catfish-like mouth
With its one tobaccoed tooth centered, like a hook.

My father has taken me to Joe's to buy catfish.
I sit on a sun-warmed rock and watch Joe ready to string the fish.
When Dad says, "Ginny, don't move,"
I sense his fear and freeze. Joe aims. "Got 'im."
The rattler is dead.
Father piggybacks me to the Model A
Counts out bills for Joe--an extra five, I think.

I look back at Joe, slipping ever like the current,
Joe's river, Mark Twain's river, Lewis and Clark's river,
The river and Joe slipping slow--
Slipping over time.

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MEB/76

The Gageby Girls

I idled at the front door
Waiting for Harry Gageby
To pass our house so I could say
"Here's your dime and may I please
Have my jump-rope back?
My father says I can't take money
From any man but him."

I'd say it as Harry went to town
Not as he came back with the
Bulge under his arm.

By 9:30, I told Mother.
She stopped working up the grapes,
Untied her apron and said she'd just
Go call on the Gageby girls
(past eighty, never married).

I had to stay at the station with Dad
Who silenced my questions by letting me
Plunge my bare arm in the icy pop-case
To hunt for Cream Soda.
Then Mother rushed back--ghost white.
"Dad, it's Harry Gageby, hanging by the neck
In the chicken house, and the girls
Just sit in the parlor with the shades drawn.
They want you to come get the chickens."

Dad and the station idlers went fast
With two poultry crates and a corn knife.
I sneaked out the back way and beat them there
To hide in the shadow of a mulberry tree where
I peeked in the chicken-shed to see Harry Gageby,
His eyes bulged like purple grapes in his black face,
Swinging to and fro over the egg crate
He'd stood on to reach the rafters
And knot my jump rope.

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One Big Standpipe and I

In the wisdom of my seventh spring
I crouched on top the town's water tower
Unwound my tiny length
As I clung with Herculean strength.
What a giant I was
How tiny the houses
The red brick school a playhouse
The cars like colored dots
On my Uncle Wiggly game-board.

If I released my hold
On the iron beams,
I could perhaps reach up
And pull down an early star
To crown my head.

Only when two firetrucks screamed up,
A crowd gathered and shouted
"Hang on, hang on,"
Did I wonder how I'd get down.

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Cub House: November 30, 1962

I hunched on the bench with other reporters--
A cub crammed beside a chain-smoking veteran.
A hanging in the Kansas Death-House
Was big stuff.
No matter that I'd never been to a funeral
Or touched a dead person.
Lee Andrews was my age, I judged,
A convicted killer of parents and sister;
Former English major (like me),
Asked for paper and pen, scribbled a few sentences,
Read, re-read, read again.

It was time.
No-nonsense guards hooded him,
Shackled him to walk the path to the gallows.
He dropped the wadded paper near my feet.
I pressed the wrinkles out to read,
"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power
. . .The paths of glory lead but to the grave."
And joined the pilgrimage.

Back at the office--"How'd it go?"
"Run of the mill." I grabbed my old lit book
As my guts griped like Christian's in Pilgrim's Progress.
Sat on the john and puked all over
Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard."

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(On November 30, 1962, Lee Andrews of Kansas City, Kansas, was hanged in the Kansas Penitentiary Death House for killing his parents and sister. The two murderers of the Clutter Family, immortalized in Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, were awaiting death also. The facts about the quotation are recorded by Capote in the work cited.)

Bottom Acres

The plow, silhouetted
Against the sun
As evening sagged,
Was our "magic moment."

We had rivered the day
splashed and laved each other,
pioneered in new intimacies.

As the moon cleaved
the edge of darkness
you pulled me, stumbling through furrows,
but still the magic held.

Years later, the night you died,
I spilled my grief with dew
fresh like the river water,
caressed the splintered handles
of the weathered plot
in the half-light of early morn,
had no regrets that
I'd spent my life
yoked to plowshares.

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The Governor's Garden

Eight o'clock heat veiled the Governor's mansion and garden,
Settled in layers on the dirty river with its littered banks,
Blued the coal cars, the waiting freights on the siding
Where three skinny black boys with spare rib cages
Dug, barefooted, in the refuse on the barge, rat-like
Scrounging for a bite to eat or a treasure to sell.

While in the garden, near the black pointed iron fence,
The Governor's gardener in green and white uniform
Whistled "Missouri Waltz" as he worked, pruned, tamped
The soil around the galardia, the phlox, the nasturtium,
And took special pains with the baby's breath.
He moved from beds to borders at the intricate grillwork,
Conversing with himself and the flowers, pulled off
A broken bleeding heart and ground it with his heel
Before he threw it in his trash and went to work
On an intricate knot garden.

While the little boys choreographed their way
Over broken glass, rotting fish, old car parts, weed
To scramble up the bank.

Later, I bought a color postcard of the Governor's garden,
Jefferson City, Missouri, which said,
"Blooms are picked at various stages,
From bud to blossom, depending
On their color intensity."

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Poetscout: On Collecting and Selecting Poetry

Paul B. Janeczko

It started with baseball cards. At first, the Chicago White Sox. Don't ask me why, but the White Sox were my team. Strange, perhaps, for a kid who lived in New Jersey, but they had the men who caught my fancy: Nellie Fox, Turk Lown, Minnie Minoso, and Ted Kluszewski (with biceps so big he had to wear sleeveless jerseys). My heroes. My stars.

I was quickly ensnared by a spring frenzy that swept the playground of Our Lady of the Assumption School: collecting, trading, and gambling for those color pictures of baseball players with five o'clock shadows and baggy pants. The more cards I collected, the more I needed. But it went beyond just amassing cards.

While other kids were content to simply collect cards, I wasn't. I had Vision. I saw all the possibilities hidden in the faces of the players as well as in the information on the backs of the cards. And on those evenings when I was supposed to be doing homework, I studied my cards. As soon as my bedroom door closed, I pushed aside the catechism or geography and dragged out my Keds box of baseball cards, rubber banded according to teams, and rearranged them. I made a team of players born in New Jersey. I had my Alphabet Teams on which each position was fielded by a player whose last name started with a different letter of the alphabet. I even had a team of Polish players. Dream teams every one.

Long after the White Sox had lost the '59 Series to the Dodgers, I found myself reading poetry instead of the backs of baseball cards. I also found myself in a high school classroom teaching English. Poetry was what I most liked to teach, but I was dissatisfied with the poetry anthologies that were available. So, rather than being at the publishers' mercy, I mimeographed poems and used them in my classes. Those poems became the foundation of my first anthology.

Since then I've come to read poetry the way some people watch soap operas, work in their gardens, or follow the Red Sox: irrationally, compulsively, endlessly. I read poems nearly every day whenever I find myself with a few unfilled minutes. In fact, I've found some poems while eating breakfast, sitting out an early April blizzard, and waiting to have a molar drilled and filled. The poems I read come from books and magazines that I buy or borrow from friends and libraries. When it comes to libraries, I'm a great browser, so I often take books without any knowledge of the poets. Such gambles often pay off for me.

I look for poems that strike me. Those are the ones I save. I copy

these poems and file them in subject/topic folders where they wait to be discovered like promising rookies. After the poems sit in folders for a while, I read through them again. Not all of them at one sitting, of course, but perhaps a folder at a time. This reading allows me to see similarities and differences in the poems that may help me place them in a book, but it does more than that. Some of these poems stick in my subconscious where they rest for weeks, even months, until reading other poems may recall them.

But folders of poems do not an anthology make. Poems must connect with other poems. Some associations are apparent, but I look for the connections that aren't so obvious. I want the reader to think about how the book was put together and why poems are where they are. These links should also help the reader understand the individual poems. I discovered, too, while working on don't forget to fly that groups of two to six poems work better for me than larger groups. I followed the same pattern in Poetspeak. Of course, this makes the anthology more difficult to organize because I must connect all the sections as well as the poems.

As every collector of baseball cards knows, half the fun of having them is trading them. And so it is with collecting poems. Maybe the only difference is that while nothing could have persuaded me to part with a single member of the White Sox in 1959, today I will gladly part with the poems I've discovered in the hope that they will in turn be passed along to someone else. That was the idea behind my first book for Bradbury Press, Postcard Poems. I chose short poems, poems that can be jotted down on the back of a postcard and sent to a friend. Poems aren't meant to be kept in a shoebox all banded together—they need to breathe, get out on the field and have a chance at bat.

The anthologist's job is to bring poems and readers together. I've discovered, especially since working on Poetspeak, that good poems are almost as countless as stars. Readers of poetry, on the other hand, are still easier to count, but I believe that their number is growing. I hope that my books help more readers discover more good poems.

How to Grow an Anthology

Ben F. Nelms
with Paul, Lynne, Greg, Mary and
Sixteen Other Students in T409

This is an open letter to publishers who produce anthologies of poetry for young readers. It's a letter from me, your friendly book reviewer who after reviewing hundreds of poetry anthologies still gets positively jubilant when he finds that fresh, thoughtful, attractive volume among all the tiresome, mundane, patronizing ones that cross his desk, who looks every year for another Watermelon Pickle or don't forget to fly or I Am the Darker Brother. The letter is from me, but the words are cribbed from twenty of my colleagues who enrolled in my seminar in Literature for Children and Youth last winter. They were teachers and librarians, elementary, secondary and college. Some taught history, some taught reading, some taught English, some taught everything. Some taught "special" kids, some taught very young kids, some taught recalcitrant kids, some taught just about every kind of kid. They reviewed literally hundreds of collections of poetry: big, fat anthologies (mostly for teachers, we decided); attractive, slim volumes; thematic collections; collections organized thematically; collections by individual poets; illustrated versions of individualized poems; books of humorous poetry and nonsense; collections mostly by and for women; collections from minorities; etc., etc., etc. Each selected and annotated five or more favorites. Each chose a few poems all on the same topic or theme for our own class anthology (which, honoring copyright laws no matter how senseless they are in regard to poetry, we copied only once and passed around). And, finally, each wrote a letter of advice to prospective publishers of poetry anthologies for the young people they know and work with.

If the publishers--out there, somewhere--fail to read this, or even more unthinkably, fail to recognize the worth of what we have said and do not require our immediate services as senior editors and marketing consultants, we submit that there is a message for other readers anyway--for those of you who are teachers and librarians, mothers and fathers, like ourselves. There is a world of appealing poetry for young readers and perhaps an infinite variety of ways to organize and present it attractively to them. You are not stuck with that big, cumbersome volume called The Family Book of Famous Verses (or whatever) nor with your grandfather's yellowed, frayed copy of The Winged Horse Anthology. If you look hard enough you can find bright, inviting collections for your classroom, your library, your family bookshelf. And, if you don't, what's even more important is that you can make your own (providing you obey all the senseless copyright laws and make only one copy for yourself).

FRIENDLY ADVICE ON HOW TO GROW AN ANTHOLOGY

Ten Commandments:

1. Obviously the first criterion would be that it should contain good poetry.

2. The poems should be accessible at first glance, but rewarding to ensuing readings.

3. Choose poems which concern things the children can relate and respond to (bicycles, bubblegum, boring teachers) without "talking down" to them. It should contain poems that deal with the real world, but it should also include the make-believe, faraway and nonsensical.

4. Request a variety of poets. A few David McCords and Aileen Fishers would be okay, but I'd prefer poems not so sing-songy and sweet.

5. Include those emphasizing the line (and the idea) rather than just the meter and rhyme. Images should be clear and vivid. Poems should, for the most part, be short. They needn't rhyme, although some traditional selections would be welcome.

6. Do not include "flowery poems," mushy poems and those old-fashioned poems people used to memorize.

7. The poems should not be squished on the pages. That makes them look formidable and terrifying.

8. The book must be small (no 400-page anthologies for my kids!) with a single poem on a page.

9. The only organization for an anthology is little organization, unless poems are grouped in a subtle way through quiet themes and images.

10. The poems should "sing."

Specifications:

How to Grow an Anthology for Adolescents

Don't pull any punches, buddy. Yes, these kids know about leaves and glistening icicles, but they also know about death and picking your nose. Kids love surprises. They want to feel that they know about a lot of things at this age, so verify them --but also shock them. Let them know that they can't always look at things and people and feelings from one perspective. It's hard for them to know this, but they need to hear it. They don't want to hear that what they do is right or wrong. But in your choice of poems you need to consider that these kids need to hear experiences which others have had and in which those others have grown or been defeated. And they want and need to have fun. They like to be part of the class community and laugh together at a shared joke. You want to think about including school experiences in your choices for this purpose.

Give me a variety of ethnic writers that reflect the real world.

Give me a variety of form in poetic presentation--some free verse, some blank verse, carefully patterned verse.

Give me poems for delight as well as thought-provokers (no sentimental stuff that sounds like greeting card verse).

Give me freshness of imagery, but imagery that will connect with my students' experience.

Give me a mixture of subject matter--lyrics among narrative, variety of subject matter so that students won't think of poetry as just being about certain topics-ideas.

Bound? Why not a variety of designs, use of color, little books put together in a box, so that altogether they represent poets/ voices shouting, whispering, crying, laughing, sharing the human experience. I see the design as capturing itself the full expanse of what poetry can be. And I like the experience of poetry to be uncumbersome, the volumes held by hands discovering that poetry isn't too heavy to bear--so the books within the set should be small.

How to Grow an Anthology for the Youngest Readers

Make this volume two ways: One a big fat volume that the kids can lug to a desk or table and read to feel really important. Then, make a series of skinny books that can be taken to a corner to be read alone or shared with a friend.

The anthology for primary students must have poems they enjoy hearing and ones they can read. The book should be an attractive shape--to get their attention--small and inviting. The title must be unusual--to attract their attention. And before we get to the poems, we must have super, bright, balancing illustrations. Now we've got the kid caught! ! !

The poems, no more than 20-30+ on separate pages, would carry a theme with which they could identify. It must express their view of life. There should be short witty ones and narrative ones. They should be of varying style--concrete poems, rhyme, free verse, etc. They should be ones that draw them back again and again, so that once they're caught in the format of the book, they won't feel "trapped."

The anthology should be a collection of poems that are traditional and not traditional. Some classic poems should be chosen, but then complemented by poems that have the same subject but a different perspective. Even perhaps a deliberate organization of a classic poem to one modern poem, with an illustration that complements both, however big an order that may be.

How to Grow a Real Anthology

I've tried to bring to mind my variety of students who (most) say they "don't like" poetry because "it's all that rhymy, sappy, sugary stuff--yuck!"

So it would be an anthology for them--Real Highschoolers Don't Read Poetry. It would have illustrations (something like J. Viorst's If I Were in Charge of the World, or better yet, Shel Silverstein). The selections would be topic-oriented--such as sports, cars, school and teachers (starting with Brautigan's "Jesse James"), love/relationships, who am I?, outdoor sports/activities. It should probably be a paperback--a little larger than a novel but not much since it should be easy to carry, put in lockers, etc. It should have witty and serious poems--and should encourage them to laugh, cry, think, say "oh,yeah," and best of all, try writing their own poetry.

Actually, making an anthology sounds like an exciting and challenging project.

POETRY COLLECTIONS WORTH SEARCHING FOR

Adoff, Arnold, ed. City in All Directions. New York: Macmillan, 1969. Illustrated by Donald Carrick. There is an interesting section containing "Notes" on the poems, giving geographical information and enlightening bits of information concerning the areas mentioned in the poems.

------. Eats: Poems. New York: Lothrop, 1970. Adoff presents his readers with recipes for cooks, would-be cooks and eaters, especially eaters. His use of food imagery, placement of words on the page and the illustrations appeal to those infatuated with food.

Brewton, Sara and John, and John Brewton Blackburn, eds. Of Quarks, Quasars, and other Quirks: Quizzical Poems for the Super Sonic Age. New York: Crowell, 1977. Illustrated by Quentin Blake. Poems on space travel, science, computers, television and other appliances, supermarkets and historical progress. Parody and rhyme are used to make wry comments on twentieth-century life. Some high points are excerpts from Paul Dehn's Leader Treasury of English Verse, e.g., "Geiger, Geiger, ticking slow/O'er the plains of Mexico,/ What mortal hand could put its thumb/ So neatly on uranium?"

Ciardi, John. Fast & Slow. Boston: Houghton, 1975. Illustrated by Becky Gaver. Twenty-four funny pithy poems. These rhyming poems stimulate both thought and laughter for young and old alike.

Cole, William, ed. Beastly Boys & Ghastly Girls. New York: Dell, 1964. This is a collection of nearly 80 poems about plain naughty boys and girls. The poems express the true thought and manners of both everyday children and really naughty children. These rhyming humorous poems are easily understood on the first reading.

Farber, Norma. Never Say Ugh! to a Bug. New York: Morrow, 1979. Pictures by Jose Aruego. A collection of 20 poems, with whimsical illustrations of bugs. Poems vary in length and form. Some are humorous, almost cute, while others are more serious. For the young child.

Field, Edward, ed. A Geography of Poets: An Anthology of the New Poetry. New York: Bantom, 1979.
As Field explains in his introduction, "Writing poetry is not. . .for sissies anymore." He selected poems on the basis of "authenticity"; a wide variety of topics and styles is presented. The interest level and level of sophistication required from the reader suggest use of this anthology in high school and college/adult life. The strength of this anthology is its organization. Poets are linked regionally, and Field makes the wide diversity both manageable and appealing. There is a brief biographical sketch of each poet. A bargain.

Giovanni, Nikki. Ego-Tripping. Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill, 1973.
Proud, sensitive, enthusiastic, and perceptive poems fittingly illustrated. A fine, rare collection about black children and for all children.

Gross, Sarah Chokla. Every Child's Book of Verse. New York: Franklin Watts, 1968.
Illustrated by Marta Cone. This is a captivating anthology that ought to be kept on every teacher's desk because it contains verse about nearly every subject imaginable. The anthologist has attempted to avoid poetry dealing only with sweet, nice, innocent things--"out with the sugary cuteness--with animal-cracker-dipped-in-cocoa-imitations of Robert Louis Stevenson." Instead, she has selected narrative poems with a "happy shock at the end"; old standards, but not the expected ones, whose meaning has not lessened with time; poems by recent writers such as Merriam and Ciardi; work of foreign writers; touches of country spiced with city verses; and three poems about crocodiles.

Hine, Al, ed. This Land Is Mine. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965.
Illustrated by Leonard Vosburgh. From a purely historical point of view, the anthology is thorough and instructive, with poems spanning the history of America. The poets are mostly traditional, and many folk songs and ballads are included.

Holman, Felice. At the Top of My Voice. New York: Scribner's, 1970.
Illustrated by Edward Gorey. The author has taken a child's perspective to write whimsical poems about children experiencing growing up and grown-ups.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett, ed. My Mane Catches the Wind: Poems about Horses.
Illustrated by Sam Savitt. A slim volume of 22 "horse" poems--in a variety of meters, forms, and moods--illustrated by the official artist of the U. S. equestrian team.

Hughes, Ted. Season Songs. New York: Viking, 1975.
Illustrated by Leonard Baskin. The seasons include the climate seasons, the seasons of animals, the seasons of life. Hughes takes the viewpoint of whatever he is writing about--a new-born lamb without a will to live, a seed being hurled into the ground.

Jones, Hettie, ed. The Trees Stand Shining: Poetry of the North American Indians. New York: Dial, 1971.
The poems are "songs"--prayers, stories, lullabies, warchants--and are illustrated with peaceful, delicate paintings.

Kaplan, Cora, ed. Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets. New York: Paddington, 1975.
Original portraits by Lisa Unger Buskin. This collection presents the work of 24 poets--some famous, some relatively obscure, none now living. The works are clustered around a thematic assessment of what it has meant for over 300 years to be a women and a poet.

Kennedy, X. J. and Dorothy M. Kennedy, eds. Knock at a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry. Boston: Little, 1982.
Illustrated by Karen Ann Weinhaus. Mostly short poems by standard, contemporary, and anonymous poets, intended to stimulate interest in reading and writing poetry. Included is a "Do It Yourself" section on writing poetry.

Kherdian, David, ed. Poems Here and Now. New York: Morrow, 1976.
Linoleum cuts by Nonny Hogrogian. This is a small jewel of a collection of poetry by contemporary poets. These are poems of "laughter, amazement, delight and surprise."

Larrick, Nancy, ed. Bring Me All Your Dreams. New York: M. Evans, 1980.
The theme is dreams--one poem to a page. Larrick believes that young readers are poetry buffs if you "give them poems that sing out to them." These poems do. The language is strong, simple and easy to relate to. The editor has found a wide variety of poets, from a Sioux Indian to a Nazi concentration camp victim.

Lee, Dennis. Alligator Pie. Boston: Houghton, 1975.
Illustrated by Frank Newfeld. "Whatever a poem comes from, it's not from good intentions." Lee believes that poems should be fun, imaginative and ridiculous.

Lowenfels, Walter, ed. The Writing on the Wall: 108 American Poems of Protest. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
All of these poems are on the mindlessness and uselessness of war, and even though they were written in the 1960s, they are not dated.

Mayer, Mercer, ed. A Poison Tree and Other Poems. New York: Scribner's, 1977.
The 20 poems are strikingly complemented by sketches in subdued hues of grays and browns.

O'Neill, Mary. Fingers Are Always Bringing Me News. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
This delightful book contains 14 poems on hands (of persons of all ages) and the wonderful things they do. An excellent stimulus for classroom discussion and for poetry writing.

Silverstein, Shel. A Light in the Attic. New York: Harper, 1981.
Silverstein's poems and drawings are captivating to kids of any age.

Viorst, Judith. If I Were in Charge of the World and Other Worries. New York: Atheneum, 1981.
Life is not easy for the persons in these appealing poems, but they do put the worries into a humorous perspective.

Coda

"Why," I asked Hazel Kennedy, "did you read us those poems in Freshman Composition class?"

It had been thirty years since I had taken Freshman Comp, and, in truth, I remembered very little of what had gone on in that class. But I had never forgotten that, occasionally during that fall semester, Mrs. Kennedy had come in to class and had read us--wonderfully--a poem or two. I could still see her face brighten when she said "suffice" in Frost's "Fire and Ice," and time and time again since the brilliant Friday afternoon when she had read us Dylan Thomas's "Poem in October," I had "walked abroad in a shower of all my days." We had not had copies of the poems nor, as far as I could recall, had we discussed them. But some of them had been in my head ever since those serendipitous readings, and now I wanted to know what she had been up to.

"The love of poetry can't be taught," she answered in reply to my question, "but it can be communicated." Then she told how, when she had been an undergraduate at Mills, Professor E. O. James--"Jimmy," beloved of his students--had sometimes simply read. "He read and we fell in love," she said. Why? "Because he loved it." She got up and handed me her college Dickinson, pointing to a tiny "EOJ" she had pencilled in by one of the poems: "We ate and drank the precious words." The commemorating initials recurred throughout the volume.

Then she handed me her Modern Library Frost, from which protruded a marker. "See," she smiled, "I'm ready for class." Surely enough, there was a marker at "October" and "Reluctance"; I remembered them well. "One can find a love of language on his own," she said, "but I believe it needs to be shared. Do you remember that poem that Dylan Thomas wrote to his father?" I did. Only the wonder of it, not the sense, had come through to me when she had first read it, but now I recited "Do not go gentle" for us.

I wanted to know how we had behaved when she had read to us--were we joyful? puzzled? unrevealing? Could she tell? "Reactions vary," she said. Sometimes a face, or a question or comment, will show interest or delight, but for the most part a teacher never knows about the main things that take place in her students.

Sometimes, however, one does get a hint--as on the day when I discovered that I was "Jimmy's" grandchild.

L. W.

Contributors

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The editors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Peter Kyper, Barbara Mercer, and Margaret Muse in preparing this issue of MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN.

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MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN is the official publication of the Missouri Association of Teachers of English and is published six times yearly. MATE is an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. Membership in MATE, including a subscription to MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN, is $8.00 per year. Address manuscripts and other correspondence to Linda Wyman, Editor, Lincoln University, Jefferson City, MO 65101. Send membership fees (check to MATE) to Peter Hasselriis, c/o MATE, 207 Education Building, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211.

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